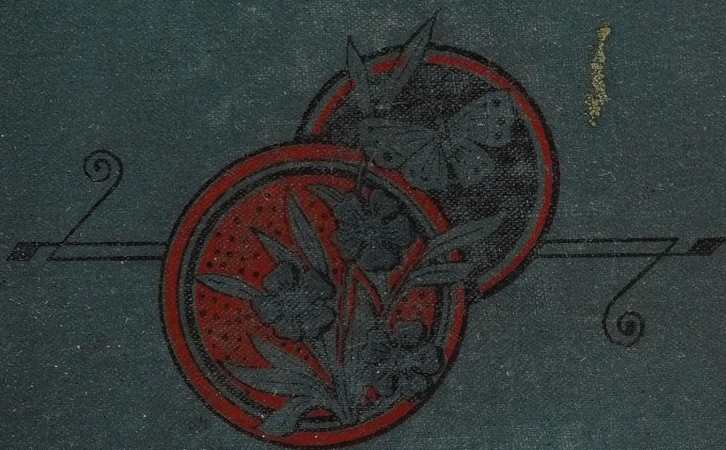



KIT AND KITTY

R. D. BLACKMORE









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KIT AND KITTY,

A Story of West Middlesex.

BY

R. D. BLACKMORE

AUTHOR OF "SPRINGHAVEN," "CHRISTOWELL," ETC.

"Si tu Caia, ego Caius."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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KIT AND KITTY.

CHAPTER I.

HARO!

A STRANGE thing befell me on my way home, which I would have avoided describing if I could; for my adventures have but little interest, except so far as they are concerned with Kitty. But this one unluckily did concern her deeply, inasmuch as it brought great affliction on her, and left her without my assistance, at a time when she stood in especial need of it.

She had made me promise that I would not attempt to walk all the way to Sunbury in such a bitter night, and with the storm increasing, till no one could tell what might come of it. Accordingly I made my way to Notting Hill, intending to get into an omnibus there, which

would take me at least as far as Richmond. There I meant to have a mutton chop or two, and perhaps a pint of Mortlake ale, which is generally of good substance, and thus be set up for the cold walk home. And if this had been done, as was really intended, probably I might have been at home in good time to tell my Uncle all about it, before he had finished his go-to-bed pipe.

But as it happened, when I came out at last, from all this brick and mortar skittle-ground, into the broad Western road, and knew pretty well where I was and how the land lay, not an omnibus was to be found anywhere, except those that had travelled out before the storm began, and were bound to get home again somehow. And these had some trouble in getting along, with the snow clouding up in the horses' faces, and forming great balls on their feet, and clogging the dumb heavy roll of the frozen wheels. All the 'busses that should have been ploughing and rolling towards Shepherd's Bush and Turnham Green, had resolved to remain in their yards for the night. Let other horses tug, and wallow, and smoke like beds of mortar; let other coachmen flap their breasts and scowl instead of answering;

and let other threepenny fares look blue and stamp in the straw to thaw their toes. It was worth much more than the money would fetch, to cross their legs by the taproom fire, or whisk their tails in stable.

At first I took it as a wholesome joke, that the fourteen miles of road before me must be overcome by toe and heel. As for a cab, I had never been inside any feminine bandbox of that name, and if I would have condescended to it, there was no such thing to be got to-night. I was young, and strong, and full of spirit, with the sweet words kindling in my heart, as memory stirred it from time to time; and if any one had bidden me look out for danger, I should have said, "Let me see it first." And in this humour, I strode on, without even turning my collar up.

But the world became wrapped up more and more in deep white darkness, as I trudged on. As the houses along the road grew scarcer, they seemed to go by me more heavily and slowly, and with less and less power of companionship. There was scarcely a man to say "Good night" to; and the one or two I met would not open mouth to answer. And when I came through a great open space, with a white spire standing

like a giant's ghost, I could hardly be sure that it was Turnham Green, so entirely was distance huddled up with snow. But I ran into a white thing in the middle of the road, and the gleam of an ostler's lantern showed me that it was a brewer's dray, with the horses taken out, and standing with their heads between their legs close by a sign-post. "You better turn in, mate," the ostler shouted; "you're a fool if you go further, such a night as this." I saw a red steam in the bar, and knew that this must be the *Old Pack-horse Inn*, whose landlord had raised a famous apple; and my better sense told me to follow advice. But the pride of fool's strength drove me on, and without slackening a foot I lost sight of it in the solid daze.

There was nothing to be afraid of yet, and I felt no kind of misgiving, but began to let my legs go on, instead of walking consciously. At one time I began to count, as if they were a machine of which I was no longer master. I counted up to a thousand, and thought—"About seven thousand more will do it, and that they can manage without much trouble." Then I gave up counting, and must have passed through Brentford, as in a dream, and so to Twickenham, and through that again.

There were nearer ways in better weather ; but although I could not think clearly now (through cold, and clogging feet, and constant dazzle of white fall around me) I had sense enough to stick to highways, as long as they would stick to me. At Twickenham I had a mind to stop and get something to eat, being faint with hunger, for I had seven and sixpence in my waistcoat-pocket. I cannot tell why I did not stop, and only know that I went on.

The snow must have been ten inches deep on the level, and as many feet in the drifts, for a strong wind urged it fiercely, when I came at last to the *Bear* at Hanworth, an old-established and good hotel. The principal entrance was snowed up, from the sweep of the roads that meet there, for every road running east and west was like a cannon exploding snow. But I went in by the little door round the corner, and finding only the barman there—for all neighbours had been glad to get home while they could—I contrived, with some trouble, to ask for a glass of hot brandy-and-water. So great was the change from the storm and the whirl, that my brain seemed to beat like a flail in a barn, and the chairs were all standing on the ceiling.

“Don’t you go no further, sir; you stop here,” said the man, who seemed to know me, though I did not know him. “It would take a male helephant to get to Sunbury to-night. There been no such snow for six and forty year; old Jim the ostler can call it to mind; and then it was over the roof, he saith. You look uncommon queer already, seem to be standing on your head a’most. Why, bless me, you be drinking from the empty glass!”

But I found the right glass with his help, and swallowed the hot brown draught without knowing it. Then I asked him the time, and he said, “Nigh on ten o’clock. You take my advice, and have a bed here. Well, wilful will, and woeful won’t, when it’s too late to mend it.” He cast this at me, as I said “Good night,” and without sitting down staggered out again.

I believe that even now I should have reached home safely, not having so very much further to go, if the roads had been wide and straight as they were thus far. But two things were very much against me now, and both of them made a great difference. I had turned from the main road into twisting narrow lanes, and my course was across the wind instead of right

before it. Without that strong wind at my back I could scarcely have reached Hanworth by that time, though it seemed a very long time to take from Notting Hill, compared with the usual rate of walking. But now the fierce wind was on my left side quite as often as behind me, and it drove me from my line, as I grew more feeble, and knocked my weary legs into one another. Moreover it seemed to go through me twice as much, and to rattle me like splinters shaken up, and to drive the spikes of snow to my heart almost.

If I had walked as in a dream before, I was moving as in a deep sleep now. I had some sort of sense of going on for ever, as a man has a knowledge of his own snoring; and I have some weak remembrance of beating with my hands—for my stick must have gone away long ago—to keep off a blanket that was smothering me. Then I seemed to be lifted, and set down somewhere, and it did not matter where it was. And what happened after that was not to me, but to people who told me of it afterwards.

For my Uncle Corny went to bed that night, in a very bad worry of mind, and fitter to grumble at the Lord than to say his prayers.

Not from anxiety about his nephew, who was sure to turn up somehow ; but because he had frightful misgivings about his glass, and his trees, and his premises at large. The roof of his long vinery was buckled in already, when he went with a lantern to look at it ; and many of his favourite apple-trees, which he loved to go and gaze at on a Sunday, were bowed with the wind and the snow, and hanging in draggles, like so much mistletoe. He never swore much at the weather ; because it seemed like swearing at heaven, and he had found it grow worse under that sort of treatment. But our Tabby Tapscott (who feared to go home, and tried to sleep on two chairs in the kitchen) declared that he used some expressions that night, which were quite enough to account for anything.

In the morning however there was no fault to find with him, as soon as he had done a good hour's work in the deep snow and the nipping wind, and improved his circulation by convincing everybody that he was still as young as he ever was. He relieved the laden trees, wherever it was wise to do so, and with the back of a hay-rake fetched the white incumbrance from the glass, and stamped his feet and

shook his coat, and had a path swept here and there, and told himself and Selsey Bill, that a good old-fashioned winter was the thing to send all prices up. But when he sat down to breakfast, he kept looking at the door, as if for me; and at last he said to Mrs. Tapscott, who was shaking in her apron—"Why, where's that lazy Kit again? Is he frozen to his pillow? Go and give him a good rattle up. He deserves cold victuals, and he shall have nothing else."

"Her bain't coom home," replied Tabby, looking as crossly as she dared at him. "Much you care for the poor boy, Measter. I rackon the zuow be his winding-shate. No more coortin' for he, this zide of kingdom coom, I'd lay a penny."

"Kit not come home! Kit out all night, and you let me go on with my trees and roofs! But you know where he is, or you would not take it so, and you snoring away by the kitchen-fire. None of your secrets about him! Where is Kit."

"The Lord A'mighty know'th where a' be." Poor Tabby began to whine and cry. "The zecret be with Him, not me. A' wor to coom home, but her never didn't. A vaine job for 'e

to zake for 'un. Vaind un dade as a stone, I reckon."

"Nonsense! Kit can take care of himself. He is the strongest young fellow for miles and miles, and accustomed to all sorts of weather. What's a bit of snow to a young man like Kit? You women always make the worst of everything."

"But her bain't coom home;" answered Tabby with all reason. "Her would 'a coom home, if so be her worn't drown'd in the znow, I tull 'e, sir. No more coortin' for Measter Kit, in this laife. A' may do what a' wool, in kingdom coom."

"Stuff!" cried my Uncle, not caring to discuss this extreme test of my constancy. "He has stopped at some house on the road, or up there. Perhaps the Professor would not let him go, when he saw how bad the weather was. There is nothing to be done, till the Post comes in; though I am not sure that the Post will be able to get in. If the letters are not here by ten o'clock, I shall go to Hampton to look for them. They are pretty sure to get that far."

The morning was fine, though bitterly cold after that very heavy fall; and people began

to get about again, though the drifts were too deep in many places for a carriage to pass till they had been cleared. My Uncle set out on foot for Hampton, and there found the mail-cart just come in. The Postmaster was in a state of flurry, and would not open the Sunbury bag, but sent it on by special messenger, as the cart could get no further. My Uncle had the pleasure of walking with it as far as our Post-office ; and after all that, there was nothing for him. " Well, a man must eat," was his sound reflection. " I shall have a bit of dinner, and consider what to do."

It was getting on for two o'clock, as they told me, when a man who had come from the *Bear* at Hanworth, upon some particular business in our village, knocked at my Uncle's door on his return, to say that I had forgotten (which was the truth) to pay for what I had the night before. He was also to ask how I got home, because I looked " uncommon dickey," as he beautifully expressed it. In half an hour every man in Sunbury, owning a good pair of legs, and even a number of women and boys, set forth to search the roads and fields, for it was hard sometimes to tell which was which, in the direction of Hanworth. This

was no small proof of the good-will and brave humanity of our neighbourhood; for any of these people might have lost themselves in the numb frost, and the depth of drift; and there were signs of another storm in the north-east.

My Uncle, with a big shovel on his shoulder, and a bottle of brandy in his pocket, put a guinea upon me at first, and then two, and then jumped to five pounds, and even ten, as the hope of discovery waned; and at last, when some had abandoned the search, and others were muffling themselves against the new snowstorm, he mounted a gate and with both hands to his mouth shouted—"Five and twenty pounds for my nephew Kit—dead or alive; twenty-five pounds reward to any one who finds Christopher Orchardson."

This may appear a great deal of money for anybody to put me at (except my own mother, if I had one), and the people who heard it were of that opinion, none of them being aware perhaps that the reward would come out of my mother's property, which had no trustees to prevent it. And for many years afterwards, if I dared to think anything said or done by my Uncle was anything short of perfection, the women, and even the men would ask—as

if I were made of ingratitude—"Who offered five and twenty pounds for you?"

And they felt the effect of it now so strongly that a loud hurrah went along the white plain, and several stout fellows who were turning home turned back again, and flapped themselves, saying, "Never say die!" With one accord a fresh pursuit began, though perhaps of a ghost even whiter than the snow; and taking care to keep in sight of one another, they began to poke more holes, wherever they could poke them. For some had kidney-bean sticks, and some had garden forks, and some had sharp pitch-forks from the stable; and if they had found me, I had surely been riddled, and perhaps had both my eyes poked out. But the Lord was good to me once more, and I escaped being trussed, as I might have been.

For just when it was growing dark, and another bitter night was setting in, with spangles of hard snow driving, as they said, like a glazier's diamond into their eyes, and even the heartiest man was saying that nothing more could be done for it; through the drifting of the white, and the lowering of the gray, a high-mettled horse came churning. It was beautiful, everybody thought, to see him scatter-

ing the snow like highway dust, flinging from his nostrils scornful volumes, with his great eyes flashing like a lighthouse in the foam. Men huddled aside, lest he should spurn them like a drift, for his courage was roused, and he knew no fear, but gloried in the power of his leap and plunge.

“Giving it over, are you all?” Sam Henderson shouted, as he drew the rein, and his favourite stallion *Haro* stood, and looked with the like contempt at them. “Then a horse and dog shall shame your pluck.”

From beneath the short rough cloak he wore, a pair of sharp eyes shone like jewels, and two little ears pricked up like thorns.

“*Spike* is the best man here,” said Sam, as the wisecracks crowded round him. “All you have done is to spoil the track. Keep behind me, and let me see things for myself.”

My Uncle, who never had been fond of Sam, said something disdainful and turned away; but Henderson, without even looking at him, rode on, and the best men followed him. He took them almost to the *Bear* Hotel, watching both sides of the road, as he went, and still keeping his dog before him. Then he turned back, and said, “Keep you all on my left.

None of you tread any gap on the right. I saw the place as I came along. When the moon gets clear, we shall find him."

The snow-cloud in the east began to lift, and the moon came out with a bronzy flush, as my Uncle told me afterwards, and the broad expanse of snow was flickered with wan light and with gliding shades. Then all came back to the place where Sam, being mounted and able to command the slope, had discovered certain dimples—for they were nothing more—which might be the trace of footsteps snowed over. Here he gave his horse to be held, and leaving the road with his little Scotch terrier *Spike*, scooped the light surface from one of the marks, and found a hard clot beneath it. He put the dog's nose in, and patted him, and *Spike* gave a yelp, as if a rat were in prospect.

"Let him alone. Don't say a word to him," cried Sam, as our people grew eager. "He don't want you to teach him his business. If you knew your own half as well, there'd be less money in London than in Sunbury. Keep back, I say, all of you."

The little dog led them across a broad meadow, two or three hundred yards from the highway, yet in a straighter line towards Sunbury, and

nearly in the track of an old footpath. Then he stopped in a dip, where a great rise of snow, like a surge of ground-swell, swung away from them, and combed over into the field beyond without breaking, like the ground-swell frozen. They said that it was a most beautiful sight, such as they never had seen before, and could scarcely hope to see again in one lifetime; reminding them of the great wax-works, when the wax is being bleached, at Teddington. But they could not stop to look at it; and the little dog went round, and dived into the tunnel on the further side.

Presently he yapped, as if in hot chase of a rabbit; and an active young fellow jumped through the great wave, and was swallowed up, leaving his hat behind. Then they heard him crying faintly, "Here he is! Come round, and dig us out to this side."

It is a strange thing, and I have not the smallest remembrance of having done it; but I must have dragged my frozen body through the hedge, in the cope of life with death, and got on the leeward side of a stiff bulwark of newly bill-hooked ashplant, which stopped the sweep of drift, and served to cast it like the lap of a counterpane over me. In the bottom where

I lay there was scarcely any snow, but a soft bed of fallen leaves, upon which they found me lying like a gate-post flung by, to season.

“Dead as a doornail!” said Rasp the baker.

“Stiff as a starfish!” cried Pluggs the grocer, who had spent his last holidays at the seaside.

“Ay, and colder than a skinned eel!” added Jakes, the barrowman.

But my Uncle said—“Out with you, coward lot of curs! Our Kit shall outlive every one of you. The Lord hath not put him in that nest for nothing.”

Then Sam Henderson pulled off his cloak, like the good Samaritan, and threw it over me. And taking me by the shoulders, with my Uncle at the feet, he helped to bear my stiff body back to the road; where they set me upon *Haro*, with my head upon his mane; and the young man who had jumped into the drift was sent ahead, to fetch Dr. Sippets to my Uncle’s house.

CHAPTER II.

ON THE SHELF.

THAT season, there was no Christmas-tide for me ; no " Happy New Year," to wish to others, and be wished ; nor even so much as a Valentine's Day, to send poems to girls, and get caricatures. In the leeward of the wild storm, I had been saved by a merciful power from the frost of death, and by constant care and indefatigable skill, I was slowly brought back into the warmth of life. But strong as I was, and of tough and active frame, with habits of temperance and exercise, there was no making little of the mischief done ; and I could not have survived it, if I had been a clever fellow. For one of the most racking and deadly evils of all that beset the human frame was established in mine, and there worked its savage will. When I was just beginning to get warm again, and to ask where I was, and to stretch my tingling

joints, symptoms of rheumatic fever showed, and for weeks and for months it ran its agonizing course. The doctor did all that any man could do; and my Uncle went up to his cupboard in the wall by the head of his bed, and brought down a leather bag, and looked at it fondly, and then looked at me.

“It was put by for a rainy day; and there can’t be a rainier day than this,” he said with some drops in his own eyes, as Tabby told me afterwards. “Let the business go to the dogs, if it will. Where’s the use of keeping up, with no one to keep up for? Dr. Sippets, I never thought to see this day. Fetch the best man in London, and let him cheat me, if he will.”

If I had been at all a clever fellow, my mind would have stayed with me, and worried out my heart, when dreadfully pushed to carry on its proper work, with the lowering and the heightening, and the quivering of the pulse. But being just a simple mind, that took its cue from body, and depended on the brain for motion, and the eyes for guidance, when these went amiss it quite struck work, and never even asked who its master was. Thus it came to pass that Kitty’s sweet and tender letters lay

upon a shelf but a yard or two away, and no hand was yet stretched out for them.

At last there came a letter sent in special trouble, as was plain from many signs upon it, and from the mode of its delivery. For Mrs. Wilcox came herself, the roads being once more passable, and perceiving how things were in the house had a long talk with my Uncle. This good woman, as I may have said, was much attached to Miss Fairthorn, and had promised to take charge of my replies, and even to give me tidings of her, if anything happened to disable her from writing. But no provision had been made for any default on my part, as I was supposed to be free, and strong, and sure to come when called for.

“The poor young thing has been in such a taking,” Mrs. Wilcox told my Uncle, “at not having so much as a single line from your poor nephew, you see, sir. You may put it to yourself how you would feel to be looking and looking for letters about business; and this is worse than business to young folk; they goes on as if it was all the world to them. And Miss Kitty always did have such an uncommon tender heart; you never see the like of it in all your life. What was she to conclude except that

Mr. Kit had throwed her over, and perhaps taken up with some of them country girls down here. It wasn't, you see, sir, as if he had written once, and told her he meant to stick fast to her. And yet she couldn't bring her mind for to believe that such a nice young gent would be guilty of such conduct; and of course she knows right well how bootiful she is, though you never see her look that sort of way, as young ladies with a quarter of her good looks does. I declare to you, sir, when I was in the 'bus, holding of this bag exactly as you see me now, I felt that I could scratch out both his eyes, tall and strong as he is by Miss Kitty's account. Bless her gentle heart, what a way she will be in, when she hears she have thought ill of him undeserving. Though a relief, sir, on the whole, for I believe she never done it; and better be in a snow-driff than belong to another woman."

"You are a remarkably sensible lady," said my Uncle, desiring to make the best of things. "But I do not like to open poor Kit's letters; and there are six of them already on a bracket by his bed, waiting till he comes round a bit. You must understand, Mrs. Wilcox, what this means. He isn't off his head, exactly, but—

you know that we all get a little abroad, when we lie on our backs so long as not to know our legs."

"I do, sir, I do. I can feel it all through me, by means of what happened to my own husband. Ah, he was a man—could take a scuttle full of coals, and hold it out straight, the same as you might march up the aisle on a Sunday, with your hat right for'ard, to show that it was brushed and shining. But poor Wilcox, he went away at last, with a tub of clothes in his lungs, and the same may occur to the best of us; mayn't it, Mr. Orchardson? But if you feel a delicate sort of feeling about breaking open the young lady's letter, and the young gent from the snow-drift is still looking at his legs, I can tell you a good bit of what is going on; though I never was one, and Wilcox knew it, for hearkening so much as a word they say, when the women have done with their teas, and the men stand against the low green palings, with a pot, and a pipe as long as their shirt-sleeves.

"Well, sir, it do appear that two bad ones has turned up, over and above the one always there, which I will not name, consequent upon fear. One was Sir Cumberance Hotchpots, or

some such name, proving to be a wicked man from the North ; and the other was her brother, as ought to be all over, according to the flesh of marriage, sir. Donovan Bulwrag is his name, but every one prefer to call him ‘Downy.’ A hulking young man is my opinion of him ; and it has been my lot to behold a good many. You may see it on the tables, sir, that come down from the Mount, going into church any Sunday, that such is forbidden by the law of Moses, for any Christian man to marry. Their father is one, and their mother is one ; and they have no right to make a pair of them. You holds on with that, sir, as a respectable man, who has trodden his way in the world, is bound to do ?”

“Yes, Mrs. Wilcox, I hold to it strongly,” said my Uncle, “if I understand you. Do you mean to tell me, that this young man——”

“There is the facts, sir, and none of my telling. I was always a very bad hand at telling, though Wilcox he used to say otherwise, when he might be overcome in argument. But facts or no facts, the truth is as I tell you. This Mr. Donovan have come home, from Germany, or some such foreign parts ; and whatever his meaning is, that is what it comes to—Miss Kitty can’t have no peace with him. And a yellow

young man, Mr. Orchardson ; as yellow as a daffodil, his hair, and beard, and eyes."

"I don't care a fig what his colour may be," cried my Uncle, being now on his high ropes ; "he must be a black blackguard, and nothing else, if he dares to take advantage of a girl he should protect. Poor Kitty, what a kettle of fish, she is in ! You need not tell me, Ma'am, I can see it all. I have always had a gift in that way. Though I have not had so very much to do with women, for which I thank the Lord, every night of my life, I understand their ways, as well as if I had been one of them."

"Then you must be a wonderful man, sir, indeed. The most wonderful I ever come across." Mrs. Wilcox smoothed her dress, as if to ask what was inside it, but reserved her own opinion as to what was not.

"I mean it," said my Uncle, who grew stronger always, whenever called in question. "It may not be the general thing ; but so it is with me. And now I would venture to ask you, Ma'am, what you consider the next thing to do."

"Well," replied the lady, highly flattered by request for advice from such an oracle, "if I were a strong man and a very clever one, I know

what I should do at once. I should go up and fetch her away from them all, and let none of them come anigh her."

"And what would you say, Ma'am, supposing you had done it, when you found yourself served, the next morning perhaps, with a warrant for abduction of a maiden under age, and then committed for trial as a criminal? What would you say to that, Mrs. Wilcox?"

"I should say that the laws was outrageous, and made for the encouragement of vice and wickedness. And I should put it in the newspapers, right and left, till the public came and broke down the doors of the jail, and got up a public subscription for me."

"Where is her father? What is he about?" My Uncle thought it waste of time to argue after that. "Her father is the only person who can interfere. Has he been knocked on the head, and killed by one of his own battering rams?" Mr. Orchardson's knowledge of scientific matters was more elementary than even mine.

"Not to my knowledge, sir; though like enough that will be the end of him. He have gone to the ends of the earth, I believe, to arrange for going ever so much further in the

Spring. There is no help to be got from him, sir, now, if there ever was any chance of it. The poor young lady is delivered as a lamb between two lions to devour her, with a tigress patting them on the back, and holding her down while they carry it out. What will Mr. Kit say, if you allow it, sir?"

"You may be quite sure that I will never allow it, though at present I cannot see what to do. You have quicker wits than we have, Ma'am; I ask you again, is there anything you can think of? Has her father any friends who would take her in?"

"Not one, to my knowledge," answered Mrs. Wilcox, after counting on her finger-tips some names that she had heard of; "that dreadful creature have contrived to make every lady in the land afraid of her. And the poor Professor only knows the learned men, and the learned they are the less they cares for one another. 'Tis the learning that is at the foot of all this trouble. You must see it so yourself, sir, when you come to think about it."

"And the law, Mrs. Wilcox, the law is still worse. She is not of age, you see; and her father has placed her, or at any rate left her, in the charge of that woman, whom he has been

fool enough to marry. If my nephew were in health, I should say to him at once, 'Take the bull by the horns, or at least take the young lady, get a licence, and marry her, and defy those people. Her father's consent has been given; and if he chooses to leave her in that helpless state, you must rescue her, and have no shilly-shallying. But for me to come and take her, is another pair of shoes. It might ruin her fair name, as well as get me into trouble; and what could I do with her, when I had got her?'

"You are right, sir; I see it all as clearly as you put it. But will you come up, and have a talk with her? A word from you would go as far as ten from me. And it would make her feel so much less forsaken like. I could manage to get her down to my little place, and the news I have got for her about poor Mr. Kit will set her up in one way, while it knocks her down in another. Oh, how she have cried, to think that he could be so false to her, because she wouldn't believe a single word of it, all the blessed time! And now, if I can send my little Ted to her to-night—the sharpest little chap he is, in all the brick and mortar trade; he have never lost a sixpence, sir, from all them roaring

navvies—though you might not think it, it will brisk her up amazingly. There is nothing so hagonizing to the female spirit, sir, as to find itself forsaken by the other sex. And your nephew, Master Kit, he mustn't think of dying yet; no cough about him, sir, nor nothing in the kidneys, only got a chill from being frozen to a hicicle, and his head upon the moon, which goes for nothing. Lor', sir, the number of young men comes every day, from the best part of London too, according to my Ted, a-staring at the great works round our way, which is to be the fashion in a few more years, and not a head among them fit to go upon a donkey! It doesn't matter what's the matter with the head, one item, sir, in these times now upon us and increasing daily. Keep your spirits up, sir, and I shall tell Miss Kitty. A young man, as is all right, except inside his head, isn't no more to complain of than a cuckoo-clock, that have left off striking, and keeps better time for that. What time did you say the last 'bus at Hampton was, sir? If I was to lose it, wherever should I be? And a good step from here to Hampton too."

"I will send you to Hampton, in the spring-cart, Mrs. Wilcox," said my Uncle, warmly

joining in her estimate of the age; “and to-morrow, if the roads permit, I shall hope to call upon you, about eleven o’clock; and if you can manage to get Miss Fairthorn to meet me, why, it may be a little comfort to her, and we may be able perhaps to see what can be done for her.”

CHAPTER III.

A DOWNY COVE.

It could hardly be expected that my Uncle Corny should grow very miserable about this matter. He knew that young people of the ordinary cast tumble into love and tumble out again, with perhaps a little running of the eyes and nose, and a hat crushed on the head, or a ribbon saturated; but nothing that penetrates the skin, far less puts a "tub of clothes," as Mrs. Wilcox said, into the lungs. And it would not have been reasonable to demand of him, that he should believe in any grand distinction between the case of Kitty and myself, and that of any other couple he might come across, in a life whose main nucleus was Covent Garden. That which chiefly moved him, as he told me in the end, and as I might have known without his telling, was the iron sense of justice, gilded haply at the corners, and crowned with a little

touch of chivalry. To his sturdy sense of right it seemed a monstrous thing, that an innocent girl, and such a lovely girl, should be locked away from all who were longing to help her, and left at the mercy of two bad men.

Therefore he donned his Sunday clothes, though he grumbled a good deal at having to do it, and without a word to me put old *Spanker* in the shafts, and drove away alone in the green spring-cart, with a face which made all the village say to one another, that he must have a County-court job on his hands. Dr. Sippets, who came to see me every day, had by this time supplied such a row of medicine-bottles, that we glazed a new wall with them forty yards long, for he would not allow a farthing on their return, though he put them in the bill at twopence halfpenny apiece; and that glazing brought him even more than that much again, from the number of boys' fingers which he had to dress. For he was a skilful, as well as zealous man, and did his utmost for his patients and his family.

He had now begun to "exhibit" mustard oil externally, as well as zinc, and especially sulphur inside; till the sulphur began to ooze through my pores, as if I had been a Tea rose

suffering from mildew. Then Tabby had to rub me with the mustard oil; and the more I groaned, the surer she became of its effect. With this vigorous treatment I began to rally, and even heard Uncle Corny depart, and contrived to steal a peep at him behind the window curtain. But they told me some fib about his errand.

When he put up his horse, somewhere near Holland Park, he had not far to walk to find Mrs. Wilcox, who received him with great cordiality. And she sent her little Ted, who proved to be the very boy that had guided me among the brickfields, with a note which he managed to convey to Miss Fairthorn. "Rumpus going on," he said when he came back; "they makes more rumpus in that house, than a score of navvies over one red herring. But cooky's not a bad sort; she'll give it to her."

It was nearly an hour before Miss Fairthorn came, and then she was so nervous, and down-hearted, that they scarcely knew what to do with her. At first she had quite forgotten Uncle Corny, having never seen him in his best clothes at home, and being distracted with sorrow and ill usage. For as yet Mrs. Wilcox had been unable to get a word with her about

the visit of the day before. Gradually however she began to understand what had happened, and why she had not heard from me.

"Then he has not forgotten me, after all!" she said, in a tone that made her old nurse sob, and my Uncle look out of the window. "Something told me all along, that he could not forget me, any more than I could do such a thing to him. But you say that he is ill, that he has long been ill; and perhaps he will never be well any more. Tell me the truth, I would rather know it. Is he dead, is he dead, Mr. Orchardson?"

"No, my dear, thank the Lord, he is all alive, and getting ever so much better every day. He went off his head, just a little for a time; and he did not know me from the man in the moon; and what do you think was the word that was on his tongue, all day, and all night too for that matter? Guess, and I'll tell you if you are right."

"Oh, I know what it was! It began with a K, and it was not a very long word, was it? It was 'Kitty.' Don't tell me that it was anything but 'Kitty.'"

"No, my dear, I won't, because I never tell fibs. Sure enough that was it, like a cherry-

clapper; only in a hundred different tones. I used to say that if you were there, you'd get heartily tired of your own name."

"Never, so long as it came from his lips. But I think I should have broken my heart, all the same. It has been the kindest thing you could do, to keep all knowledge of this long suspense from me. How soon will he be better? How soon will he be well again? Well enough, I mean, to come down, and let me see him?"

"At present, Miss Fairthorn, wherever he is not mustard, he is brimstone. You cannot expect him to present himself in that condition. But we have got the mischief out of his joints by this time. Dr. Sippets considers it a very happy thing that the ailment flew there; for his heart will be all right, and that's a great part of the system, in love. His head is of no importance in that condition; and Mrs. Wilcox proved to me last night, that it is quite a superfluity in the present days. Madam, you know you did, and you did it thoroughly."

My Uncle gave a wink at Mrs. Wilcox, not with any overture to familiarity—for he was very shy of widows—but to intimate to her that she should talk a little nonsense, after his example, as a rescue from hysterics. For poor

Kitty had been passing through much outrage all the morning; and now to be met with this shock of strange news (bad to her head, but perhaps good for her heart) after such a long time of dejection, was enough to throw the finest daughter of Divine Science into some confusion as to all her organisms. But she fetched herself back from the precipice of sobs, with a deep draught of air, and spoke as she did not feel.

“If he is being treated like—like beef, I think I ought to have a voice in the matter. Will you let me come down, and do it for him—or see that it is done properly? My father has taught me so many things——”

“My dear,” said my Uncle, being truly thankful to her, for not even pulling out her handkerchief, “you are the sweetest young lady I have ever met. No, you shall not come down and nurse our Kit; not only because it is not the place for you, but also that it might be very bad for him. His mind must not come back with a jerk, however pleasant the jerk may be. He must come round slowly, and he has begun to do it, under Tabby Tapscott’s scrubbing-brush. But you shall come and see him, in a week, my dear, if you think you can hold out

so long here. And now tell me, what is going on, to urge your gentle nature so."

The young lady looked at Mrs. Wilcox, as if she could hardly tell what to do. She was very unwilling to refuse my Uncle anything he might ask her; and yet she could not bring herself to speak of such matters to him.

"I will tell you all about it, when she is gone," said the lady of the shop, as if hurried for time; "but I know by her look that she is getting in a fright. What will they do, if they catch you out, dearie?"

"I defy them. I defy them. They may do what they like. Now I know that Kit stands fast to me, after all he has suffered for my sake, am I likely to show the white feather? Uncle Corny, I will come away with you, and let them do their worst, if you will take me."

She pulled her hat down on her forehead, and drew her crinoline into small compass, as if she were ready to mount our spring-cart; and her manner had such an effect on my Uncle—for very pretty girls do even more by attitude, than by words or looks—that he saw himself driving her away, and looking back with a whistle of defiance at the world. Moreover she had called him "Uncle Corny," which put him

on his mettle to deserve it; and though there have been few men born as yet, with more gift of decision in their nature, he looked at her lovingly, and hesitated.

"It will not do," Mrs. Wilcox interrupted, as if she were once more in office as nurse. "Of law I know nothing, sir, and you do; as you was pleased to tell me yesterday. If her father was at home, and sanctioned it, no doubt it might be in your jurisdiction"—the good lady was proud of her law, and repeated—"it might be in your jurisdiction, sir. But without any sign of that, where should we be? Pulled up for conspiracy against the realm, and nothing for me, but to put my shutters up."

"I fear that you are right, Ma'am," replied my Uncle, "though I don't care twopence for the law sometimes, when I feel better law inside me. But it is the young lady we must think of first. We must let her do nothing to injure herself. Have patience, my dear. They may torment you in the house, but they cannot take you out of it, and marry you to anybody, against your own will and pleasure. Your will and pleasure is to have our Kit; and with the will of the Lord, you shall do so."

"I suppose I must go back. There seems

nothing else to do;" Miss Fairthorn spoke very sadly, looking from one to the other, and trying to be cheerful. "But if the worst comes to the worst, will you find a place for me, Uncle Corny? I have got a little money my dear father gave me; and they shall take away my life, before they get it."

"Bravo, well said indeed, my dear!" This alone was needed to confirm my Uncle in his high opinion of her. "What a wife you will make for a steady young man! Yes, my dear child, I will find you a place, and you shan't pay sixpence for it. And none but your father shall take you away, unless the Lord Chancellor comes himself to fetch you."

"Thank you. Then I shall know what to do. I am not so much afraid of them, now I know that Kit is true. I shall say to myself— 'What is this to put up with, after all that he has borne for me?' Give him my best love, and tell him to get well, and sit by the window, and look out for me. Good-bye, Uncle Corny; I will not attempt to thank you. Good-bye, Nurse. I don't deserve such friends. They may do what they like now, and I shall only laugh."

"She deserves the best friends, and she shall

have them too," Mr. Orchardson said, as soon as she was gone, with little Ted to see the way clear for her; "that's what I call a downright good girl, without a bit of humbug in her. A fig for their science! Will it ever produce such a fine bit of nature as that is? Now tell me, as far as you can, Mrs. Wilcox, what it is they want to do with her, why they torment her so, and what we can do to stop it."

My Uncle laid his watch on the table, because he wished to be home before dark, and the days, though drawing out nicely, were not very long. He knew that the lady with whom he had to deal, instead of putting things into small compass, would fetch a large compass about them, whose radius would only be lengthened by any disturbance or hurry on his part. So he merely placed his watch as a silent, or at least a comparatively quiet witness, and reproof; but the scheme failed, as it deserved to do. All he obtained by it was a lesson, which he often repeated afterwards—never set a watch to go against a woman's tongue; it puts her on her mettle to outgo it; and one wants winding, but the other never does.

Mrs. Wilcox had not so very much to tell, but she found a vast quantity to say, and never

said it twice to the same effect. Stripped of her embellishments, reflections, divergences, and other little sallies, it was something as follows.

Captain Fairthorn had been called away to see to the fitting of some ship near Glasgow, with engines of a special kind, and large coal-storage, so that she might keep at sea for months together—seven years the lady said, but that looked like a lady's tale. And there were to be wonderful appliances, such as had never been heard of, on board her, as well as every kind of scientific instrument, all under the Professor's own direction. If ever a man was in his own element, this was the man, and the time and place were there. No wonder that he forgot all other things below the moon; and it was much to his credit that before he started, he insisted on a promise from his wife and two step-daughters, that his dear child Kitty should be treated kindly, and harassed by none of them while he was away. Upon that condition only, would he send them every month a handsome sum out of the liberal payment he was to receive for his services. And he thought himself very firm, and most sagacious—even suspicious it might be—in providing that before he drew each cheque, he should have by post

a line from his own daughter, to this effect—
“I am very happy, and every one is most kind to me.”

Unluckily his suspicions were not very shrewd; for he forgot that there were pens and ink and fingers at Bulwrag Park, quite apart from Kitty's, well able to afford him that assurance in her name, for the gift of forgery was in the family; and his daughter was not to distract him with letters, so long as he knew that she was comfortable.

No sooner was he off the scene, than that old rake, Sir Cumberleigh Hotchpot, reappeared, having purposely kept away till then, for he dreaded the simple and calm man of science. He annoyed poor Miss Fairthorn with his odious advances, and coarse familiarity, and slangy talk, and he took a mean advantage of her gentle diffidence by perpetually assuming that she was pledged to him. This, and the contempt and spiteful hatred of her stepmother, seemed more than enough for the poor girl to have to bear; but soon a far greater distress was added. Donovan Bulwrag, the only son of the Honourable Mrs. Bulwrag Fairthorn—as she absurdly called herself—came home from the continent, where he had been engaged on

the staff of some embassy, after running from his debts; and the house, and the people, and the chattels therein were not good enough for him to tread upon. This would have mattered little to Miss Fairthorn (who was rarely favoured with the Bulwrag society, except for the purpose of insult) if this divine Downy, as his mother called him, had not taken into his great yellow head the idea that he was in love with Kitty.

This dearly loved son of his mother was a strong young man of three or four and twenty, able to take his own part anywhere, either with violence or with fraud, but preferring the latter, when it would do the trick. Mrs. Wilcox said that he had three crowns to his head, which went beyond all her experience, although she had been in a hospital. She had known malefactors with two sometimes, and you never could tell where their mischief began, because it started double; but she had combed the hair of this boy once, and nothing would tempt her to do it again. She was not superstitious, but afraid more often of being too much the other way; and she left it entirely to the future to prove her a fool, if she deserved it. Only let any one look at his head.

For it was not only that he was bad inside, but that he gave the same idea at first sight, to any one having any sense of human looks. It was not Mrs. Wilcox alone who said this, but my Uncle as well, when he happened to see the young man, while going to look for his horse. He had notice that he might have the luck to meet him, and sure enough he had, if there was any luck in it. And my Uncle Corny, though a man of strong opinions, did not go so entirely by outward show.

Mr. Downy Bulwrag, as the grandson of a lord, and likely enough to be a lord himself, if people in his way died out of it, had a sense of being somebody, and liked the world to know that he was rather an important part of it. Not that he swaggered, or stuck out his arms, or jerked himself into big attitudes—as some bits of the human chip do—all that he left for fellows who had yet to prove their value, and knew much less of life than he did. His manner and air were of solid and silent conviction, that without him this earth would be a place unfit for a civilized race to inhabit. He prided himself, if he had any pride, upon his knowledge of human nature; and like most who do that, he attributed every word and every action to

selfishness, spite, and cupidity. And like the great bulk of such people again, he was truly consistent in his own freedom from any loftier motives.

His mother's pet name for him had been confirmed by all who had the honour of knowing him. He was downy in manner, as well as appearance, and (according to the slang of the day) a "downy cove" in all his actions. No one could look at his bulky form (which greatly resembled his father's), enormous head furnished with bright yellow hair, soft saffron moustache, and orange-coloured eyelashes, without thinking of a fat downy apricot, and fearing that he had none of its excellence. His face too was flattened in its own broad substance, as that yellow fruit often is against the wall, and bulged at the jowl with the great socket of square jaws. But the forehead was the main and most impressive feature; full, and round, and almost beetling, wider even than the great wide jaws, but for its heaviness it would have looked like the bulwark of a mighty brain; and there was room for the brain of a Cuvier in that head.

My good Uncle Corny, meeting this man in the road, and knowing who he was from de-

scription received, clapped his keen gray eyes with emphasis upon him, as much as to say, "I mean to look you through, young man." Downy, with his usual self-esteem—which stands like a dummy at every loophole, when the garrison of self-respect is gone—gazed at the grower with a placid acceptance of rustic admiration. Little did he dream that another creak of his boots would have brought the crack of a big whip round his loins; for my Uncle was a hasty man sometimes, and could prove it his duty to be so. And the heavy half-somnolent look of Downy—as if he were gaping with his eyes almost—was enough to put a quick busy man in a rage, even if he had no bone to pick with the man who was making a dog of him.

CHAPTER IV.

OFF THE SHELF.

I HAD missed "the enjoyment of that bad weather"—as one of our workmen called it, when he drew his wages *gratis*—through having too much at the outset. There had been at least six weeks of frost, some of it very intense; and it was said by those who make a study of such things, that Christmas Day, 1860, was the coldest day known in the south of England, since Christmas Day, 1796. And but for a break at the end of the year, when a sudden thaw set in before the steady return of low temperature, it is likely that the Thames would have held an ice-fair above London Bridge; as in 1814, and as threatened again in 1838. But the removal of old London Bridge has made perhaps a great difference in that matter.

One of the reasons, why I could not get rid of the chill that struck into my system, was

perhaps the renewed attack of cold every night through all that bitter time. For in old-fashioned houses like my Uncle's, there was no fireplace in the bedrooms; and a frying-pan full of hot embers, our Tabby's device, used to set us a-coughing. Every now and again I seemed to hear, when I called my wits together, the crisp light glint of the gliding skate, the hollow heel-tap of the gliddering slide, and the sharp merry shouts of boys and men dashing at the hockey-bung in the jagged slippery huddle. Then more snow fell, and the ice grew treacherous, and all was mantled in a white hush again.

But now the days were milder, and the ice had broken up, and the roads were full of quagmires as they always are, when a long frost has gone to the bottom of their metal; and everybody said that it was very brave of my good Aunt Parslow to pay a guinea for a fly, and come all the way from Leatherhead, to see if I was still alive. And it was not for the sake of being kept warm on the road—though that was the reason she assigned for it—that she obtained permission from Mr. Chalker to bring his pretty daughter on the visit she was paying. Miss Parslow was long past the age of love-

making, and had made a sound investment of her affections among the grateful canine race; but none the less for that she felt an interest in watching the progress, or it might even be the backslidings, of her own species in the fine old game. And Sam Henderson had conquered all her prejudice against him, by riding over more than once in the worst state of the roads, when no wheels could pass over them, for no other purpose, as he positively vowed, than to comfort her kind heart about her dear nephew's illness.

"Don't tell me," she said, as soon as she had seen me, and cried over me a little, for I was desperately weak; "what he wants is warmth, and change of air, and particularly careful nursing. He will fall into a decline, if he stops here; and then what will become of his darling Kitty? What chance has he here in this wretched little room, like a frog, or an empty bucket hanging in a well? And here you are giving him gruel and tapioca! Has he ever had a pint of real turtle? Just answer me that, Mr. Orchardson."

"Well, no," replied my Uncle, looking at her with surprise; "I never heard that turtle was for any but Lord Mayors. Kit has had every-

thing, regardless of expense, that our skilful Dr. Sippets recommended him. Perhaps you know better than he does, Miss Parslow. And the bottles of stuff, every two hours day and night, with half a pint rubbed in at frequent intervals, till he groans, and that shows that it has acted on his system."

"System indeed! There is no system in it, except to kill him, in spite of the Parslow constitution. The roads are very soft, but I shall send for him to-morrow, with a proper close carriage and a pair of horses. And if you try to prevent it, let his death lie at your door."

"There is no doubt," said my Uncle, after some consideration, "that your house is much warmer, and better fitted up than this with warm baths, and all that which he ought to have. And Sippets said that change of air would be a great thing for him. I will see him, before you go away, and if he thinks it would be safe, let it be so, Ma'am. But you must not suppose that I have grudged him anything. And a very pretty bill there will be for me to pay."

Miss Chalker meanwhile had made a great discovery, to wit that she had never seen

Hampton Court; and Sam Henderson, who happened to come in to ask for me, found out that he had business there that very afternoon. So after dining with my Uncle, off they set together, and Miss Parslow undertook to call for her companion upon her way back to Leatherhead. Sam had gone up several pages in Mr. Orchardson's good books, by his rescue of me, and even more by his refusal of the handsome reward which he might have claimed for it. And now there were very few days when he did not come down, and offer counsel, and perhaps bring a hare or rabbit. And my Uncle liked his stories of the lords and ladies, even when he was unable to believe them.

"Now, I am not going home without a little talk with you," said Aunt Parslow to her host, when the young couple had made off; "I must be rude enough to ask you just to spare me a little time. And I don't think you can do much on the ground just now. It must be quite unfit to work, after all the snow and thaw, and rain again coming on the top of it. And the land must be so cold that the spring will be very late. You see I know a little about gardening too. Will you try to spare me half an hour, as I can come so seldom?"

“I am always at the service of the ladies, however busy I may be.” My Uncle’s answer was truly polite, but not so true in other points. “The spring will be very late, and therefore summer will find us all behind. I mean, if we get any summer at all.”

“It is quite as likely that we shall not, and that makes it unwise of us to be in any hurry. Mr. Orchardson, you have a special gift of never being in a hurry. We women always envy that way of taking things, because we cannot hope to attain to it. You know what we are, don’t you?”

“All that is delightful, Ma’am; so far as I have had any opportunity of learning. And all that is reasonable, whenever there is nothing particular to interfere with it. I assure you that I have the highest respect for—for the way that you generally go on.”

“You pay me a very high compliment, sir, and I wish that we all deserved it. But I am sure you will admit that I am reason itself, in asking you one or two little questions. There was a little money that fell in, as a sort of windfall, or whatever you call it, to my niece, the mother of this unlucky Kit. I scarcely know what the exact sum was, though of course

I could easily find out. But it must have been about two thousand pounds. I believe that it came into your possession as his next of kin, but in trust for him of course. And I conclude that as he has long been of age, you have handed it over to Kit himself."

"Not I, Ma'am ;" cried my Uncle, who was as honest as the day. "That would have been the worst thing that I could do. I have told him of it several times, and strongly recommended him to let me apply it for his benefit. Kit is a sensible and upright fellow, and he knows when he is in good hands, that he does ; and he is capable of managing his own affairs, without anybody's interference."

"Without even his Uncle's ?" asked Miss Parslow, with a smile.

"Yes, Ma'am ; and without even his great-aunt's," Mr. Orchardson answered, with a frown.

"I have no doubt that you have acted for the best ;" the lady returned, for she wished to do no harm, and saw that it would cost me more than two thousand pounds to have Uncle Corny set against me. "And it is the best thing that could have happened to him, to come into his capital, when he wants it, without having had a chance of making any hole in it. I dare

say he has not the least idea what it is. It will be a nice little nest egg, when he wants a nest."

"I have never let him know how much it is, and I do not mean to tell him, till I hand it over. I have never touched a penny of it, my dear Madam; which I never would have told you, if you had shown a doubt of me. I have allowed it to accumulate at four per cent.; and the sum is now three thousand five hundred pounds, which will be transferred into the name of Kit, on the day that he marries Miss Fairthorn. I should have thought myself justified in deducting the twenty-five pounds reward, for his stupidity in losing himself in the snow; but Mr. Henderson will not accept it. I have kept Kit from a baby, and he was dreadful with his clothes, and broke the backs of nearly all the books he had at school. But I shall not charge him sixpence, ma'am. He has worked well for me, and he can lay in a tree very nearly as well as I can."

"Mr. Orchardson, you are a gentleman," cried my Aunt, much impressed with the increase of money; "and I would ask you as a favour, in return for my enquiries, to allow me to discharge Dr. Sippet's account."

“With pleasure, Miss Parslow, for it will be very stiff, and the uphill time of the year is before me. I do not pretend to be a gentleman, Madam ; but I should not be a man, if I wronged my brother’s baby. The only thing I ask you is to keep this from Kit’s knowledge, and leave me to tell him at my own time. I have hinted to him, once or twice, that he has something coming ; but if I were to tell him, he would go and tell his Kitty ; and I wish it to be kept from all that lot.”

“He shall not know a word of it through me, I can assure you. And I shall consider what I can do for them. But the first thing is to set him on his legs again.”

At this very moment, I was being set by a happy little accident upon my legs, as well as enjoying a delight which no money (at the finest compound interest) can insure. In the corner of the room which my aunt had so decried, and where I had passed so many miserable weeks, an old wooden bracket with three little shelves was nailed against the yellow-ochred wall. I had often cast my weary eyes in that direction, and vaguely watched a spider, who was in a doleful plight, with his legs drawn together, and no stomach left between them ; such a time was

it since he had tasted a good fly. On the bottom shelf were bottles of a loathsome disposition, pill-boxes, and galley-pots, and measures no less repulsive to good taste; on the middle shelf lay my mother's Prayer-book, and some papers of directions, and orders, and powders and the like; but what was on the top shelf I could not tell, and had often wondered languidly in the wanderings of hazy speculation. And I might have been content to wonder still, without any guide-post of interest, if I had not heard Miss Parslow say—"Ah, that would do him a lot more good than those," as she pointed to the top shelf, and then to the others.

For a time I forgot all about it, and fell into a little sleep of indifference; but being aroused by the sound of plates and dishes and the clinking of glasses down below, I longed to know what they were having for dinner, and what was the joke they were laughing at. Then a lovely smell of something came into the room, and my head went round with the effort of searching itself for the name of that fragrance, although it was nothing but fried calf's liver, with which Mrs. Tapscott was skilful. "Shall I ever have that again, instead of filthy nastiness?" was all that I had sense enough to want

to know ; and then I thought somehow of the starving spider, and looked to ask whether he was dead yet.

Not only was he not dead, but clearly (after seeing rain once more upon the window-panes) he had made up his mind that life was worth living, and a little activity might make it more so. Where he got his stuff from is more than I can tell, for any man would have vowed that his meagre body could never have supplied him with the hundredth part of the dreamiest film of a gossamer. However he knew his own business best, and he was at it, as if he were paid by the piece.

Being hungry myself, I could sympathize with him, while detesting his bloodthirstiness, as every man must who lives on beef and mutton. And I saw that he was scheming to attach his tent cords to a coign of great vantage on the top shelf of the bracket.

“ When spiders go thrumming, there is wild weather coming,” came clumsily into my half-saved mind ; and then floated into it, like a gossamer adrift, those mysterious words of Aunt Parslow. Like the spider, I desired to be on the move, and partly perhaps through the very same cause—the yearning for a wholesome bit

of flesh. At any rate, being left all alone, for the resources of the establishment were at full pressure upon hospitality, I resolved to know what was on that shelf, though it might be my destiny to perish in the attempt.

This was not at all an easy job for a fellow who had spent two months on his back; and my weakness amazed me, when I tried to walk, and I seemed to be twice my own proper length. Then I burst into a laugh at my own condition, and tried to move a little chair to help me get along, but found it made of lead, and had to coast around it. My sense of distance also was entirely thrown out, for the room was quite a little one, and yet it seemed a gallery. At last by some process of sprawling and crawling I laid hold of the corner bracket, and lifting myself with some difficulty, contrived to grasp all that was on the top shelf. A little pile of letters was in my right hand, and a light shot into my eyes, and a gleam of soft warmth flowed into my heart.

Then I crawled back to my narrow bed, so nearly exchanged for a narrower, and laid my treasure on my shrunken breast, and turned on my side, that it might not slide away. I felt as if there were two Kits now—one who knew nothing about it, and the other who wanted it

all to himself. And perhaps that other Kit was Kitty.

How long I continued in this crazed condition, it is impossible for me to say; but as sure as the goodness of God is with us, it saved my reason and my life. For by and by, a warmth of blood flowed through me, and a sense of being in a large sweet world; then memory awoke, and pain was gone, and I was like a little child looking at its mother. I did not read a word, nor care to read; but I knew whose hand was on my heart, and I would not disturb it by a stir of thought, but was satisfied with it, for it was everything. And so I fell into a long deep sleep; and when I awoke, I was a man again.

CHAPTER V.

OUT OF ALL REASON.

WORSE troubles than those of the troublesome body were visiting one worth a thousand of me. Captain Fairthorn was still in Scotland, while his fair daughter was being worried, as a lamb among playful wolves. Without any aid her stepmother was enough to supply her with constant misery ; but even her malice was more easy to endure than the insolent attentions of two vile men. To these the poor girl was exposed every day ; for if she took refuge in her own room, she was bodily compelled to come down again, and her gentle appeals and even strong disdain were treated as a child's coquetry. There are few things more truculent to a woman, even a very young one, than the jocular assumption that she does not know her mind, and perhaps has little of that article to know. Sir Cumberleigh Hotchpot proceeded regularly upon

that assumption; and though Kitty had the sweetest temper ever bestowed as a blessing to the owner and all around, this foregone conclusion and heavenly pity (from a creature by no means celestial) drove her sometimes towards the tremulous line which severs sanity from insanity.

For it has been said, and perhaps with truth, that the largest and soundest of human minds could not remain either large or sound, if all the other minds it had to deal with combined to pronounce it both small and unsound. Under the hostile light, it could not save itself from shrinking; it would glance about vainly for a gleam to suit its own, and then straighten to a line with a cross at either end, like the pupil of a cat in the fierce light of the sun.

Left in this manner without any friends, with her heart and her soul among lions, my Kitty (although of strong substance) began to doubt whether there is any justice. Good as she was, and clear and truthful, and possessing that sense—which is now turned into folly by higher discoveries—of a guiding power beyond our own, she strove to believe that no harm could touch her, while she continued blameless. But it was a fearful battle for a timid maiden to have to fight.

Happily both for herself and me, her enemies, before they got her down, fell out about their lawful prey. When Donovan Bulwrag joined the hunt, at first he was content to turn the quarry towards the other hounds, and enjoy the distress unselfishly. But after a while, like an eager dog, he began to kindle towards the prey, and shot forth jealous glances, and resolved to have a nip for his own tooth. So far as such a hound could care for anything outside his own hide, he became enamoured of the charming chase.

His mother with her quick malignant eyes perceived it, and was furious. Her pet scheme was that her sweet Downy, her Golden Downy as she called him, should marry gold, and succeed to the title—which was not improbable—restore its impoverished glory, and set her on high triumphant. Then her proud sister at Halliford would come and sue to be reconciled, and her daughters with the lovely hair would shine and marry fortunes. She would cast the Professor and his grimy works behind her, and reign as she deserved to reign.

In furtherance of this lofty plan, she had already chosen for her son a most desirable helpmate, a lady of good birth, and yet suffi-

ciently akin with commerce to redden her blue blood with gold. And a very quiet harmless girl, who would gladly fill the chest with guineas, and hand the key to her mother-in-law. To be a step-mother to gentleness had been a pleasant and refreshing task; but to be the mother-in-law of wealth would afford even finer occasions of delight. She had always been proud of her son's strong will, and resolute knowledge of his own mind, while they moved in the course she had marked for them; but if they went astray, they must be crushed. With her usual promptitude she resolved to bring the matter to a point at once.

Downy had arrived at the same determination. He had no idea of doing what he disliked, and his mother had told him that she meant to call upon Lady Clara Voucher (the only child and heiress of the Earl of Clerinhouse), and expected his company that afternoon in the carriage she had bought, but not paid for. "Very well," he had said, "we will talk about it;" for his sisters were present, and he preferred a single combat.

Knowing that his mother was now alone, he came into the room with his quiet heavy tread, and sat down, and crossed his legs, and looked

at her. Downy Bulwrag, even while he was a boy, had been able to earn a large competence of hatred; as a young man he had increased the stock, and throve upon it, and fattened on the butterine of his own slimy fame. Good and simple young fellows of his own age disliked him, from what they had heard of him; but none had the power to hate him properly, until they had seen him. But after that they knew what to do. They spat on the ground when they thought of him.

“What is it, Downy?” asked his mother, unwarily surrendering the weather-gage of silence. “You look as if something had put you out. I think it is I, who have the right to be put out.”

Downy began to roll a cigarette—that ragged mummy of the great king Nicot, which was then just beginning to cast its dirty ash about. He wetted his finger with a little sharp smack of his lips, but made no answer.

“You will not smoke here,” cried his mother, already discarding the superior maternal tone; “I never let your father smoke in my presence; and I am sure I shall never let a boy like you.”

“Who was going to smoke?” asked Downy.

with gruff contempt at this instance of feminine precipitance.

“ You may smoke, by and by, when you have a house of your own, and a dear little wife to spoil you. But you are coming with me to see her, and you must not smell of tobacco yet. For a short time you must be on your best behaviour. Not that sweet Clara would ever object to anything you like, my dear; but that others might take advantage of it, to make you seem less devoted to her than you are. She is the great catch of the season, you know, and there are so many young men after her. She will make the best wife any man could have—so pleasant, and amiable, and accomplished, and in spite of that so sweetly pretty. When I saw her, the night before last at Lady Indigo’s, I thought I had never seen any one so charming.”

“ I don’t think much of her good looks.”

“ Then you are most ungrateful, for she dotes on you. Her dear friend, the Countess, said—‘ Tell your noble Downy not to be frightened by sweet Clara’s money. Her heart is entirely his. What a lucky fellow!’ And then she sighed, for a little plan of hers has been quite upset by this romantic episode. Oh, you are

fortunate indeed, my dear ; and perhaps a little credit may be fairly due to me. Now put on the coat with the sable trimmings. You look so foreign, and distinguished in it. And it shows your broad chest in such a striking way. That dear Countess said that it made her quite jealous about her dowdy countrymen. And she thought it had something to do with your conquest."

"I don't mean to go at all." The dutiful son, as he pronounced these words, threw his bulky shoulders back, and planted one big elbow on the arm of his easy-chair, and gazed calmly through his yellow lashes, smiling slightly as he watched the colour rising on his mother's dark face. He knew that two stern wills were coming into clash ; and the victory would be for the one that did not waste itself in fury.

"Do you mean to tell me," began the lady, trembling at heart, and her voice becoming tremulous, "that you intend to throw away all I have done ? That you will not marry Lady Clara Voucher ?"

"That is exactly what I do mean. I will never marry Lady Clara Voucher."

"And why ? Perhaps you will condescend to give some reason."

"I mean to marry some one else. I mean to marry Kitty Fairthorn."

His mother arose, as she generally did, when her furious temper burst all bonds. Often enough, and too often, she had been in a tempest of wild passion; but never till now in such a hurricane of rage. At first she was stilled by her own commotion; and the lines of her face twitched as with palsy.

"Tell me again," she said, crossing her arms, and speaking with great effort, as she stood before him, and he sat tranquil; "I cannot believe it, till I have heard it twice."

"Certainly, Ma'am, to oblige you. I mean to marry, not Lady Clara, but your step-daughter, Kitty."

"You ninny, you rebel, you stubborn doll!" she had usually a fine store of these expressions, but they seemed to desert her in this great need, and he nodded his head at every one, as if to say, "Try something better than that"—"You—— But it is useless; you are too base to care, you sit there, like a lump of yellow jaundice. Do you think that a beautiful girl like Kitty—the vile, designing, artful minx; I will throttle her, I wish I had her here. Go and fetch her, bring her to me; I don't blame

you. But she shall pay for this, with her life she shall. If they hang me to-morrow —— ”

“ Come, mother, come. You have let off a good bit of steam already. You’ll be as right as a trivet, after a few more choice expressions. Don’t spare them, if they do you good, you know.”

“ I shall never be right again. My heart is broken. I feel myself dying, and you have killed me. You, my own son, have murdered me. Oh, good God ! What is this pain ? ”

She fell upon the floor, and moaned and gasped, pressing both hands to her leaping heart, and scared of all wrath by the dread of death ; now and then she muttered prayers for mercy, broken with groans of agony. Downy was terrified, and ran for brandy, as she began to tear her hair, and clutch at the carpet, with shrieks growing weaker and more gurgling. And as he ran back, his sister Euphrasia met him, and snatched the bottle from his hand.

“ You have done it,” cried Frizzy ; “ I knew you would. One of these days she’ll kill herself. You go away. You’re not wanted here. She wouldn’t take it from your hand, to save her life. I knew it must come. Get away, get away. Don’t let her eyes hit upon you, when

she rolls them; or she will go off worse than ever. She knows everything, when she is insensible."

"Well, you women are a cure!" said Downy, recovering his strength of mind. "I shall go to my own room, and have a cigar. You can come and tell me, when she is all right."

"I am not sure that she will ever be all right," said his sister, desiring to frighten him; "I have never seen her quite so bad as this."

But he only answered, "What a funk you are! She shall not beat me, with all this stuff."

He had very little conscience, and that little—to use a stock-word now in fashion—particularly *reticent*. And the still small voice, if there were any, could not find much to say this time. In nothing but the rudeness of his manner, had he offended against strict right, and he never even knew when his manner was rude, because it was his nature. He could not help having a passionate mother, who flew into a fury when her plans were crossed. So he smoked his cigar, and considered his next step.

It was plain to him now, without need of thought—for he was not good enough to be a fool—that something decisive must be done at once. He knew what his mother was too well,

to suppose that any arguments of his, or any regard for his feelings, would ever induce her to consent to his marriage with Kitty Fairthorn. And he knew that Kitty did not like him (although he had never ill-used her), and in her old-fashioned way would regard the relation of their parents towards one another as a bar to any marriage between them. And he knew that her money, through her father's neglect, had been placed out of her disposal. But in spite of all obstacles, he meant to have her, and her money afterwards.

Up to the present time, he had feigned to be the ally of Sir Cumberleigh Hotchpot, and to forward his suit very warmly. At the same time he had contrived to earn some gratitude from Kitty, and to make her look upon him as her friend in need, by flying to her rescue now and then, and sometimes even carrying off her too insistent suitor. This he had been doing more and more, as his passion increased, and jealousy combined with pity on her behalf. Thoroughly despising the older villain, for his shallowness more than his villany, he began to hate him also for his insolence to the fair one. Having now declared his own intentions, he must put a stop to all that stuff.

While he was thinking much more of these things than of his injured mother, he heard a gentle but hurried knock at his door, and in came Kitty. She was trembling and flushed, with some excitement, and her beautiful hair was disarranged.

“Oh, Donovan,” she cried, for she never called him “Downy,” “I have heard that your mother is very ill, and they are quite alarmed about her. Sarah came in such a hurry for some bottle of my father’s; but I was afraid to let her have it, for they have no idea how to use it. Don’t you think you had better run for Doctor Yallop? They won’t let me in to ask them, and I am afraid to go for him without orders.”

“No, Kitty, no. It is nothing more than usual. She would never see the Doctor, if he came; and it would only set her off again. Frizzy knows best how to manage her. She has been in a great wax, even for her; and she is just a bit frightened, as she ought to be. It will do her a world of good, when she comes round, and teach her to take things easier. But you look quite startled, my dear child. Give me a kiss, and I will tell you all about it.”

Kitty obeyed, though with some reluctance. One of her many charms was obedience, and she had often been told in the early days, that as they were now one family, to exchange the friendly salute was proper. But lately she had been surprised that Downy, after long indifference to its value, had returned to this form of expressing esteem.

The young man had meant to defer for a while a declaration which must be unwelcome at first. But he felt sure now that the first thing his mother would do, as soon as she was well enough, would be to fall on the poor maiden about it, and put it in the most outrageous way. Much better for his cause that he should speak of it himself, and win perhaps some credit for his defiance of Kitty's natural foe. He was always bold in word and deed, and now he spoke with as little fear as grace.

"You must have seen, my dear, that lately I have been growing very fond of you. You have seen that I always take your part when people go to bully you. And why do you suppose I do it? Why, because I am so fond of you."

"Thank you, Donovan. I have often thanked you in my mind, though not in words. Placed

as we are, it is quite right that we should be fond of one another."

"Oh, I don't mean that sort of thing at all. My mother married your Governor; but that would only make it natural that we should hate one another. And there is no love lost between you and Frizzy, or Jerry either, so far as that goes. What I mean is that I am fond of you, as—as a fellow is of his sweetheart. And I mean to marry you, indeed I do, as soon—why, as soon as you like almost."

Poor Kitty looked at him, as if he must be joking; or if it were not that, he must have taken too much wine, as he did sometimes, especially when he had been much with Sir Cumberleigh.

"How provoking you are, Kitty! There, sit down. You will get used to the idea in about five minutes. Why, there's nothing surprising in it, I should think. Though you may have thought that I was looking higher. But I have always had my own peculiar views. I can do without money, and rank, and all that. And I have taken a real fancy to you. This is enough to prove it, don't you think? Give us your flipper, as that old rogue says; for I mean business, upon my word I do. And I

fancy it won't stick too much in your gizzard, that the old woman rages, like a tiger, against it."

"I can scarcely believe that you mean this. It is utterly impossible; I don't know how people take such things; but to me it is simply horrible. Never speak of it again, if you wish me to speak to you. Promise me never to speak of it again."

"Very well. Settle it so, if you like. At any rate, for the present. You have got hold of some queer ideas, I suppose. High Church crotchets, or some such rubbish. You will come to think better of it, by and by."

"And by the holy poker, she shall be glad to do so," he muttered to himself when she was gone; "We will try a bold stroke, my pretty dear; and you shall come on your knees to me, to marry you."

CHAPTER VI.

A FINE TIP.

THERE were many worse men in the world even then—and the number increases with population—than the gallant Sir Cumberleigh Hotchpot. The principal source of the evil in him was that he knew not wrong from right. If he could have seen the difference, he might have been tempted by the charms of virtue; but as that pure lady had never found her way into his visiting list, it would be unfair to blame him for neglecting her. He came of good family—in one sense—and a very bad family, in another. For several generations, the Hotchpots had verified their names, by making mixture of all moral doctrine. And the air of a county, where the world is flat and oozy, may have helped to bring high and low to one dead level.

That speculation is beyond the mark; though

as everything is material now, it may justly be accepted in plea for him. What is more to the purpose, and less of problem, is the plain truth that evil blood was in his veins, and there had never been anything to purify it. In his early days, the influence of a strong, clear-headed, and resolute wife, lifting him into self-respect, and sweetening his paltry bitterness, might have saved him from his vile contempt, and made a decent man of him. And such a chance had once been his; but he cast it by through his own foul conduct, and it never came again. The lady married a better man, who was able to lead her, as well as be led; and the man she had escaped made a bitter grievance of his own miscarriage.

Now, he was one of that wretched lot—the elderly rakes, without faith in women, respect for themselves, or trust in God. Even the coarser advantages of life, the vigorous health, the good-will of the world, the desire to rise, the power of wealth—all these had failed him; and he was left with nothing but a feverish thirst for excitement, and a dreary desire to say spiteful things, which his meagre wit seldom gratified.

For this he was hated by Downy Bulwrag,

who also despised him for aping the vices which are so much easier to youth. However it was Downy's object now to ingratiate himself with this "old party;" and Downy had long acquired the art of quenching his sentiments in his object. So he took a cab, that very night, when his mother's hysterics were drowned in Cognac, and presented himself at Sir Cumberland's house, in a small square of South Kensington. He had not been encouraged to call here often; for the Baronet (who generally misplaced his shame) was shy of the fact that he had let the better part of his house to a fashionable artist, while he occupied the smaller rooms himself. The visitor found him just returned from his Club, and by no means in an amiable frame of mind, for the cards had been adverse, and he could ill afford to lose. And he did not scruple to show his annoyance, at this late and unexpected call.

But Downy drew an easy-chair near the fire, gave a kick to the Hotchpot terrier (who with sound instinct had made a dash at him), and spread his fat legs along the fender, without saying a word, till his host had done the grumbles. And he had his revenge in his own crafty way, for he gazed round the room, noting

everything, and lifting his yellow eyebrows now and then, or pursing up his big lips, and stroking his moustache, as if he were conning how much—or rather how little, the pictures, and furniture, would fetch.

“Been any auctioneers in your family?” Sir Cumberleigh’s temper was never very good, and this appraisalment of his chattels made it very bad indeed. His intention had been to have a quiet smoke, and his nip or two of cordial by the fire, while he went through his tablets by the latest lights. He had thrown off his wig, to cool his brain, and had no time to clap it on again. Frank and cheerful baldness is no disgrace to any man, and sometimes adds a crown of goodness to a pleasant face; but this gentleman had not that reward of gentle life; and his bulbous pate, when naked, was what ladies call “horrid.” His restless and suspicious eyes, and sneering mouth with lines that looked as if nature had constructed channels for the drainage of foul words, and the sour crop of blotches on his welted cheeks, were more than enough to countervail expansive brow, and noble dome of curls, if there had been any. There were none; and even Downy Bulwrag thought—“What a bridegroom for a lovely girl!”

"You are inclined to cut up rough, old boy;" said Bulwrag, after listening long to much that never should be listened to. "Something disagreed with you? It must be so, as we get on in life. Well, tell me, when you are certain that you have done exploding. No hurry. Pleasure first; business afterwards."

Sir Cumberleigh carried on a little more with his condemnation of all mankind, just to show that he was not at all impressed with this aspect of the younger man. Then his temper prevailed, as the other kept quiet; and he said—"Out with your business, if there is any!"

"I don't suppose it matters much to you. You are rolling in money, after going down to your audit, and all that sort of thing. You might like to invest a cool five hundred in a loan to me, at five per cent. Do it, and earn my everlasting gratitude."

"You have something good to tell me, or to put me up to. Upon my soul, Bulwrag, I shall be glad to know it. I have three bills falling due to-morrow. I am on my last legs, and that makes me so grumpish."

"You have been uncommonly grumpish, Pots; and I am not at all sure that I shall tell you anything. I like to do a kindness to a

friend; but you hardly seem to be quite that, just now."

"My dear fellow, you never go by words. You have seen too much of the world for that. The real friend is the man who shows you his rough side. I do that to you, Downy, because I like you."

"Then you can't have much left for your enemies, my friend. But my rule is to take things as I find them, and the same is the golden rule, according to the law and prophets. I will render good for evil, Pots; I will tell you of a nice little windfall for you, if you have the pluck to keep up with luck."

"Downy, I am up for anything. All has been against me for the last ten days, and I should like to have my revenge of it. It would take a big fence to pound me."

"There's a big pot of money the other side," said Downy, counting slowly on his fingers; "eighteen and sixteen make thirty-four, and twelve makes forty-six, and Chilian eight thousand four hundred, with the market down, should be worth another twelve, when they go up. But put it at present quotations, and you have between fifty-four and fifty-five thousand pounds, payable on the nail, and no trustees.

It would come in pretty well to start with, Pots, after paying the fellows that know no better. And you might lend me the odd four thousand upon good security. I would give you eight per cent., old fellow, and pay you like a church."

"What is it, Downy? Or are you trying hocus? Nothing of that sort ever comes my way now. I have been on the wrong horse ever since last Goodwood. And now again at Lincoln. Those cursed tips have tipped me over."

"It has nothing to do with turf, or tips. What do you think of our little Kitty coming into sixty thousand pounds, for it's worth every penny of that, they say, and nobody to look after it, but the lucky cove that marries her?"

"Sweet Kitty! My sweet Kitty Fairthorn! I adore her for her own sake, without a crooked sixpence. But it sounds too good to be true, my boy. Take a suck, and tell us all about it."

"The beauty of it is that she doesn't know a word of it;" Bulwrag began to unfold his roll of fiction very recklessly, which gave it the crackle and flash of truth. "And if we can keep her in the dark, for another ten days or fortnight, why, a bit of pluck and gumption,

and there the job is done ! You know that my excellent mother considers it one of her strictest duties to open all the letters that come to the house for the younger and feminine branches. She keeps the key of the letter-box, and no one else is allowed to go near it. When I first came back, she began to open mine ; but I stopped that, quick sticks, I can tell you."

"She is a strong party, and no mistake. I hope she won't want to come and cock over my crib, when I am spliced to the heavenly Kitty. I should get the wrong side of the sixty thousand pounds."

"Well, this morning there came a little billet for our Kitty, sealed, and got up, and looking no end confidential. The Ma wasn't going to stand that, of course ; it set up her hackles that any one should try it. She took it to her own room, and found it so important that it was not right to let the owner know a word about it, at least until the subject had been well considered. But she called me into council, and my advice was to keep it dark, and make the most of it. And here is all there is of it.

"It seems that the old scientific bloke had a sister in the wilds of Northumberland, to whom he gave fearful offence, years ago, by blowing

her cat up, or something of that sort, and she vowed he should never have sixpence of hers. But being better off for cash than kindred, which is not the usual state of things, she has left all her belongings to his daughter, straight away, in the lump, with nothing to pay but duty. Her father will be her trustee by law, I suppose, until she is of age or marries. But if she marries, without having it settled, which her father of course would insist upon, why, there you are—the happy man is master of the money, though she may go in for a post-nuptial, or whatever they call it, kind of settlement.”

“Downy, my boy, it sounds too good to be true,” said Sir Cumberleigh, looking at him doubtfully, but the young man’s great bulky face and round forehead were as tranquil as an orange; “who are the lawyers? It came, of course, from the old lady’s men of law. Was it a London or a country firm? I don’t want to be too inquisitive, you know. But in a matter of this sort——”

“The less you know the better, so long as you are convinced. You were eager to marry the girl without a penny; and what motive can I have for deceiving you? In fact, I think I have been a fool to tell you. We could let her

get the money, and what chance would you have then? Plenty of young swells, with rhino of their own, would be after such a pretty girl with sixty thousand pounds. And I will tell you two things, since you seem to doubt me. In the first place, I shall insist upon ten thou. advanced upon my note of hand at five per cent. And again for your comfort, my mother since she heard of it won't hear another word of you, beloved Pots, unless I can bring her round to it. She would naturally prefer a young soft fellow, with a fine place of his own, where she can go and govern, when she wants a little change, as she governs everywhere. So that will be all you get, old chap, by doubting yours truly. Good night, my boy. I am sorry that I ever told you."

"Don't be so hot, my friend. I never doubted you. All that I doubted was my own good luck. And upon my soul, Downy, if you had had such luck as I have, you would never place any more faith in it. Here, my dear fellow, have a Don Pintolado; there's not such another weed to be got in London. And here's a rare drop of old brandy, such as perhaps you never tasted. It's as old as the hills, and as soft as oil. You must never put a drop of

water with it. It stands me in two hundred and forty shillings a dozen; and I have never let any one see it but myself. What do you think of that now? Roll it on your tongue. The best liqueur you ever nosed is not a patch upon it. You are a good judge, give me your opinion."

"I never tasted anything like it, Pots. Where the devil do you get it from?"

"Ah, I'll put you up to that, some day. But now let us have a little quiet chat. You need not be afraid of it. Have another glass. You see I always take it in a very thin Dock-glass, made on purpose for it. If it had not been for that, I should have gone to the dogs long ago with all my troubles. However, let us hope for an end of them soon. Fifty thou. would set me straight, and I could get back the old place, and give up fast life, and turn quiet Country Squire. It is time for me to get out of all this racket, and stick to one or two solid friends like you. Now tell me, old chap, exactly what I am to do. I'll give you any undertaking you think fit. Only, of course, we must keep it dark."

"Ah, and not be in any over-hurry;" Donovan Bulwrag breathed rings of blue

serenity from the gray-edged auricula of his fine cigar, and then said slowly, "I remember some little box you used to have, about two miles beyond Hounslow."

"Yes, and I have got it still, because nobody would have it. They wanted to turn it into a poultry-breeding place, when that craze was on, but they could not pay deposit. At any rate, they didn't; and I have it still on hand."

"All right. Have it aired. It will be very pretty, now that the broom, and all that, is coming on again. In another week or so, the nightingales will be about. Could you have a snugger place on earth to pass your honeymoon in?"

"Twig," said Sir Cunberleigh, "twig's the word, with a little quiet prodding, and a special license. But won't she cut up rough, my boy? We must not have abduction. It has been done in my family; but the times were better then."

"Kitty is not the one to cut up rough. My mother has drilled her a lot too well for that. And if I come with her, and you are not seen till the last, there can be no talk about abduction. All little particulars must be left to me. You can let me your crib, if it eases you down, and produce the agreement, if there is any row.

But there won't be any row. You know the rule with women — smoothe over everything, when the job is done."

"I should like to think over it a little, Downy. I am not like a boy, who has the world on his side, when he does a rash thing in his passion. The world has been very hard on me, God knows; and I am rather old to give it another slap in the face. Why shouldn't I marry the charming Kitty, with her mother's consent, and all done in proper trim? Then we could go down to my old house, and have bonfires, and bells, and roast an ox, and all that. And she could have a settlement, why not? My lawyers could do it, so as to leave me the tin?"

"Try it on that way, if you like. How can it matter to me, beloved Pots? There are two little stodges for you to get over. Would Kitty ever look at you, if she knew she had this money? And my mother will not hear of you, since she saw that letter."

"That devil of a woman!" cried the other rather rudely, forgetting that her son received this statement of the fact. "She has always had her own way, and she always will. Thank God that she never married me. Perhaps she would have done it, if she had seen me soon

enough. If she has turned against me, it is all up, without some such lay as yours, my boy. Not a dog can tuck his ear up, without her knowing why. You could never get your sister down there, without her knowing it."

"She is not my sister," said Downy very hotly; "or do you think I would let her marry such a man as you? But the devil of a woman, as you politely call her, goes down to my Grandfather in Wales next week, and takes my two sisters with her."

"Oh, then the coast will be clear, my dear boy! That makes all the difference. . You might have told me that, half an hour ago. I see my way out of it now clear enough. The main point will be to keep the Country lawyers quiet. Unless they get an answer to their letter pretty sharp, they'll be sending up a junior partner, or their London agent, for fear of some other lawyer's finger in the pie. That would upset your pot. How are you to help it?"

"Nothing easier. For a few days at any rate. And that is why the job must be tackled pretty smart. We shall send an acknowledgment in Kitty's name to-morrow, saying that she wishes to consult her father's lawyers—

name of the firm of course omitted—from whom Messrs. So-and-so will hear very shortly; and that will keep them quiet for a bit. Those fellows make a point of never hurrying one another.”

“Capital! I know what they are too well. By the by, did you tell me the name of the gang in Northumberland? I might make a note of it. Though I must not let them guess that I have heard of them, of course.”

“You would cut your own throat, if you did, Pots. I can tell you, if you like, and get the letter perhaps to show you. But you had better be able to swear, if there should be any rumpus, that you had never so much as heard of them. And then, if you were pressed, you might admit that you had heard some vague rumour, but paid no attention to it, as it came from a source you had very little faith in.”

“Certainly. I could swear that without much harm. Don’t show me the letter; I don’t want to see it. Have another drop of this wonderful stuff. It wouldn’t hurt a child. It is as soft as milk.”

“No, not a drop. I am too late as it is. You had better keep away from our place for the present. It would not be so well for you to receive

the sack, you see, before the great stroke comes off, next week. And the mother might be apt to administer it, in her hasty way, you know. Send a line to say you have got a cold, or something. And then run down to the cottage, and begin at once to get it into spick and span. I shall come to you every night, and report progress. Sixty thousand is a good stake to run for."

"But when is it to be, Downy, when is it to be? My nerves are not what they used to be. And I shall not get a wink, till the race is pulled off."

"Oh yes, you will, if you go in for hard work. How can I tell the day, till I have seen the mother off? The sooner the better, when she has made tracks. There's an old buffer coming to see to the house, and keep our Kitty in order. But I can do what I like with her. She's mashed taters after the real thing. Be of good cheer, Pots; I should say next Wednesday, or Thursday, would see you a reformed and happy character. Ta, ta, and remember me in your prayers."

"I say, Downy, just one little thing," said Sir Cumberleigh, recalling him with some hesitation. "You must not be offended, old fellow ;

but I should be so much obliged, if you would drop your habit of calling me 'Pots' so frequently. It sounds so personal; although of course it has no application to me as yet. Why, you might even do it before your sister, and then it would be so—so unromantic. You see what I mean; no offence, you know."

"I tell you, I won't have her called my sister. She is no sister of mine, nor in any way connected. If you call her my sister any more, I shall look upon it as an insult."

"A very great compliment, I should say," Sir Cumberleigh pondered, when his visitor was gone; "what the deuce makes him get in such a wax about it? A fellow with such a batter-pudding face might be proud to call such a girl his sister. Oh, I see why it is, what a thick I must be! If she were his sister, he would be ashamed of being a party to this little plant. I don't like the look of it, and that's all about it. But such a poor devil must not stick at trifles. Sixty thousand pounds would set me on my legs again. And it is not to be had by lying down and rolling. And the sweetest girl in London too, without any cheek or high falutin. I can soon break her in to any pace I choose. I am not a bad fellow, only so unlucky.

If this comes off, I'll go to church every Sunday. But I'll take uncommon good care all the same that Master Johnny Dory does not collar too much of the rhino. I hate that young fellow, he is just like a yellow slug crawling in a mop."

CHAPTER VII.

BASKETS.

THERE are ever so many kinds of baskets used in Covent Garden Market, some of good measure, and some of guess, and some of luck altogether, like a Railway's charges. They come from every quarter of the globe; and the pensive public may be well pleased if it gets a quarter of its bargain. A bushel may hold a peck more or less, according to the last jump made upon it. The basket-makers are by no means rogues, because the contents can make no difference to them. They turn out strong ware, at a very high price, so many inches in width, and so many in depth, according to tradition. Then they pat it, and pitch it down, and paint the name upon it; and there their business ends, except to get their money. And of this they never fail; for the Grower, as a rule, grows honesty as his chief, and often only crop. But after that basket's virgin fill, how many

meretricious uses does it undergo! The poor Grower, who has paid half a crown for it, never uses it again perhaps, until it is worn out, and comes back to him, with a shilling demanded for his name; when it has spent all its prime in half the shops and trucks of London. Here it has passed through a varied course of fundamental changes, alternately holding three pecks and five, according to its use for sale or purchase. At first it was gifted with a slightly incurved bottom, not such a deep “kick” as a Champagne-bottle has—which Napoleon III. vainly strove to abolish—but a moderate and decent inward tendency. Here the rogue spies his vantage ground. Before filling it for sale, he lays it flat upon its rim, mounts upon the concave external, and with a few heavy jumps of both heels produces a bold and lofty internal dome. Then he stuffs up the cavity round the side with a tidy lot of hay, or leaves, or paper, and lo you have three pecks as brave as any four! But is he going to buy by that measure? He lays it firmly upon its base, gets inside, and jumps with equal vigour. The accommodating bottom becomes concave, and he brings home five pecks running over into his bosom.

As honest producers, we know nothing of all this—except by the mark of hobnails on our wicker, when it comes home with no integrity left—our business is to fill our baskets, whenever the Lord permits us, keeping the top fruit certainly not worse than the bottom, for that would be Quixotic, but not a bit better than human nature, and the artistic sense, demand of us. And there have been few greater calumnies of recent years—though the world grows more and more calumnious—than to call my Uncle Orchardson “Corny the topper,” as if he covered rubbish with a crown of red or gold! A topper he was; but it was only thus—he topped all his customers in honesty.

This explanation was necessary, and should have been offered long ago. But I thought it as well to let people see first from his character, as given by himself and me, that he required no such vindication. If ever there was a man who gave good change for sixpence, ay, and took good care to get it too, you will own it was my Uncle Corny.

However, he used for inferior fruit, such as windfalls, or maggoty, or undersized stuff, a cheaper and commoner form of basket, such as the dealers call “Sallies.” These are of no

especial measure, but hold on the average about half a bushel, some of them much more, and some a little less, and there is no name marked upon them. They come, for the most part, with foreign fruit in them, and are often thrown by, when emptied; and there are men about the market who collect these, perhaps for nothing, or at any rate for very little, and sell them to the fruit-growers, or the dealers, at prices which vary according to their quality and the demand for them, etc. They can often be had at a shilling a dozen, at which price they are cheap for any use; and at times they are not to be got under sixpence apiece, but perhaps the average is twopence. They are deeper than baskets of measure, and not so wide, also made of much lighter wicker, and often full of stubs inside, which would never do for best or second fruit; in fact, they are like a waste-paper basket, such as one often sees under a table.

When I had been gone, at least a fortnight I should say—though I could not be certain about dates just then—to my Aunt Parslow's at Leatherhead, my Uncle having done all his grafting by himself, for there always was some to do every year, took a general look at his trees, and found that the buds looked as

promising as ever he had seen them. He was rather surprised at this, not at all on account of the long hard winter, but because of the very cold wet summer and autumn which had preceded it. The trees would be full of unripe wood, and sappy shoots shrivelled by the frost, and scurfy bark, and perished boughs, and general discomfort, and sulkiness. At least everybody said that was how they ought to be, and my Uncle had never contradicted them, preferring a little pessimism, because it is always the safer side. And probably upon cold wet soils, all the evils predicted had succeeded, which would make it all the better for the places where they failed. So that my Uncle, while sympathizing warmly with all his brother growers in their bad look-out, shook his head about his own, and smoked his pipe, and would not speak of his chickens, much less count them.

But, when the sun began to get the upper hand of the days again, and the Spring was looking through the hedge and into the hearts of the trees almost, and the earth seemed ready to lift its breast, as a maiden does for her flowers to be fixed, and every shrub that showed a leaf had got a bird to sing to it—for a time, the best man found it hard to make

the worst of everything; and even the often frozen Grower hoped not to be frozen again this year. For the later an English fruit-tree is in showing its white or pink challenge to the sky, the less is the chance of unheavenly heaven descending with a whiter blow, and smiting all to utter blackness. The ground had been frozen to a depth of twenty inches by the rigour of enduring frost; and after that the push of Spring takes a long time to get down the line.

"Tompkins," said my Uncle, who was poking about with a spade, to kill snails in some Iris roots, for no sort of winter makes much difference to a snail; drought in their breeding-time is all they care for much—"Tompkins, it is high time to be looking up our baskets. In another month, those fellows will be sticking it on again."

"That 'em will," the long man replied. He was short of tongue, as a very tall man, by some ordinance of Nature, almost always is—perhaps because his fellow-creatures' hats have endangered it while it was tender.

"You had better go over and see old Wisk, at three-quarter day to-morrow. You can have the tax-cart, and just see what he has. He is

bound to have a good stock now, after all the long frost and snow, on hand. And he is pretty sure to be hard up. In June he begins to grin at us. Get the figure for bushels, and halves, by the gross, but don't order any, until I know. But if he has picked up any Sallies, you might bring a gross at a shilling a dozen. I will give you twelve shillings; and I'll be bound the old rogue will be glad of a bit of ready money."

"All right, Governor." Selsey Bill offered up one gaunt knuckle to his hat, which had no brim to accept it; for he had improved in sense of manners, since his wages were advanced. He had been put on, when the days pulled out, to twenty shillings a week, with a title, not conferred, but generally felt, of foreman of the outdoor work. He had a shilling apiece for his children now every week, and another for his wife, and two to think about all Sunday. And my firm belief is that if he could have earned another by wronging us, he would have made the tempter swallow it.

"But mind one thing," said my uncle strongly, for he found it ruinous to relax; "your wife's brother I believe it is, that keeps the *Crooked Billet* beyond the heath, not a hundred yards from old Wisk's place. You

need not pull *Spanker* up, to give Mrs. Tompkins's love, you know."

"Right you are, Governor. What wicked things you do put into a fellow's head!" My Uncle grinned, and so did Bill, but with his long back turned, and his hand upon his spade.

On the following afternoon, Bill acted with the truest sense of honour. As he approached the *Crooked Billet*, the wind (for which he was not to blame) brought him the burden of a drawling song, drawled as only a Middlesex man—who can beat all the North and even West at that—can troll his slow emotions forth. "Oh, I would be a jolly gardener, I would be a jolly gardener; with my pot and my pipe, for my swig, and my swipe; and the devil take the rest, say I!" Bill knew every nose that was singing this, and every fist that was drumming on the table. But such were his principles, that instead of pulling up, he let the reins hang loose, and even said "Kuck" to old *Spanker*.

Although we had owned him so long, this horse had never forgotten his ancient days, when he may have belonged to a brewer perhaps. For he never could pass any hostelry of a cool and respectable aspect, with a tree and a

trough in front of it, but that he would offer a genial glance from the corner of one blinker, and make a short step, and show a readiness to parley. He did more than this now, for he pulled up short, and tossed up his nose, and accosted with a whinny a horse of more leisure, who was standing by the door.

"Wants to wash his mouth out. So do I. But I'll be hanged if I'll go inside all the same." Reasoning thus, Selsey Bill got down, for he saw a wisp of hay by the trough just fitted to dip in the water and cool the muzzle. But before he could hoist his long legs into the cart, as he positively meant to do, a buxom short woman had his arm enclasped with two red hands, and was looking up at him, with words of reproach, but a smile of good will.

"It ain't no nonsense, I tell you, Bill," she exclaimed in reply to his soft remonstrance; "come in you shall, and have a word or two inside. I've got something particular on my mind. And you'll never forgive yourself, if you goes on like this."

What could Tompkins do? His wife's brother's wife was Godmother to nearly half his children, and she had a bit of money of her own, and no children of her own to leave it to. "Well, only

half a minute then," he said, to ease his conscience; "and not a drop of beer, you know. Leastways, not till I've been to old Wisk, over yonner."

"Why, the old chap's inside! Seems a Providence to me, because now you be bound to come in and see him. But I want to talk separate to you, Bill. You have got such a head you know, such a way up!"

The landlady took Bill to her own room round the corner of the house, so that no one saw him, while *Spanker* was linked to the post and had some hay. And she told him such a story that his little black eyes, which tried to look at one another over his great nose, twinkled, and flashed, and were full of puzzled wrath. Then she brought him a pint of mild ale, for she knew that his mind worked slowly, and required to be refreshed.

"Never heered tell of such a job in my born days. Couldn't 'a believed it, if it wasn't you, Eliza. You was always truth itself. But how can you be sartin the young girl as told you is quite right in her mind?"

"Well, I can't be certain, Bill, for she is a stranger about here. But she looks right enough, and she was genuine frustrated. And

more than that, there's several things that comes to back her up like. What shall we do, Bill? That's the point."

"Sure enough, so it is. What does Teddy say to it?"

"Well, you know what he is. If he see a murder doing, I believe he'd shut his eyes and ears, and whip round the corner. And besides that, he is never no good after two o'clock; and I only heard of this about an hour ago. So, to tell you the plain truth, I haven't said a word about it. And it's no good to tell him nothing till to-morrow morning. Not that he takes so very much, you know. But his constitution is that queer. If you had not come by, I was just making of my mind up to put on my shawl, and step off for the police. Though it's three miles to go, and then most likely never find them."

"And if you did, I don't believe they'd take a bit of notice. Leastways, not if they was disposition'd same as ours. Got never a Justice of the peace round here, some countries they calls them a Magistrate?"

"Nobody nearer than Colonel Bowles, and Ted was saying yesterday that he was gone from home. No, Bill, for all I can see, there's

not a soul to move a finger, unless 'tis you and me."

"But what can us do? I can't see no call for us to meddle, if policeman won't. Enough to do with my own kids, sister 'Liza, and nobody but me to help 'em. Well, I must be jogging."

"No, you won't be jogging, and you've got to see Wisk. Where's your common sense, Bill? Can't you see that he'll stick a shilling on to everything, if they send down here to fetch him for you. No man can abide to be disturbed with his glass, and he expects a lot of money, if he gives it up. That's the way all those ranters thrive; their beer would cost three halfpence, and they gets sixpence for not having it, and has it on the sly in their own beds. Go and see old Wisk, but not a word of what I told you. Only you must come back to me, when you have done what you want with him. No business of mine any more than yourn; and perhaps the best way to let things go by law, and not be called up and lose your time, and have to pay for it, and think yourself lucky if they don't fine you too. That is all one gets for not winking at a thief, Bill."

The truth of this was too manifest to require any acknowledgment; and Tompkins went to

see Mr. Wisk in the tap-room, and after much discussion drove him to his premises, there to see and deal about the wicker stuff. But he only got half a gross of Sallies, which proved a very lucky thing afterwards, for Wisk had no more, or at any rate said so, not liking the price perhaps, for they were good substantial stuff, which also proved a happy thing, before very long. Then Selsey Bill touched *Spanker* up, for it was getting on for dark; but he did not like to pass the *Crooked Billet* without calling, because he was proud of being a man of his word.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE GIANT OF THE HEATH.

THERE is, or at least there used to be, along the back of Hounslow Heath, a lane which leaves the great Western road on the right-hand side, and goes off alone. The soil is very poor and thin, and nothing seems to flourish much, except the hardier forms of fir, and the vagrant manner of mankind. The winter winds and the summer drought sweep over or cranny into it; and a very observant man is needed to find much to talk about.

But wherever a man or woman is, and whatever may be the season, one earnest cry arises in the bosom, and it is for beer. Those nobler beings who oust their British nature with foreign luxury, and learn to make belief of joy in the sour grape, or the stringent still, are apt to forget, as perverts do, the solidity of the ancient creed. If a good or evil genius had

stood by Sir Cumberleigh Hotchpot, or even Downy Bulwrag, and whispered—"Have a firkin there of treble X, or Indian Pale," there might be now no chance for Bill to tell the things he had to tell.

When Tompkins, with his cart half full of Sallies piled like flower-pots, pulled up again at the wayside inn, he found it dark and lonely. The four jolly gardeners were gone home, or at any rate gone somewhere; Teddy the landlord was fast asleep by the kitchen fire, and would so remain, till roused by the music of the frying-pan; they kept no barmaid, and the man who generally lounged about the stable was gone to have his lounge out somewhere else.

"Good night, 'Liza," Bill shouted up the staircase, on the chance of the landlady hearing his voice; but instead of any answer her step was heard, and she turned the corner on him with her shawl and bonnet on.

"I couldn't leave it so," she said; "I don't know what come over me. But after you was gone, my heart fell all a pitter-pattering. And such bad ideas come into my head—I never did! I could no more sleep this blessed night, without knowing more about that there business, than I could stand on my head and strike the

hours, like a clock. I may be a fool for it, and have to go before the Justices; but ease my mind somehow I must."

"'Liza Rowles," replied Selsey Bill, standing nearly two feet above her, but looking down with true deference, "if you feels that sort of thing, who am I to go again' it? You are bound to have summat in your own mind, as was never put there for nothing, Ma'am; and if it comes to that, why, so has I."

"Do you mean to say, Bill," asked Mrs. Rowles with awe, not of his height, for she was used to that, but of his thoughts coming just to her level, "that you has had queer ideas too, about what the little girl was a-telling me?"

"You have put it, 'Liza, in the very words as I should have put it in, if the Lord give me the power. But I leaves all that to my wife now. She can fit it up to meanin', and no mistake."

"Very well, Bill, there's no more to be said. Off I goes with you, and you drives round by Struck-tree Cottage, as we calls it; not that we means to make tantrups, you know; but just to see how it looks, and ease our minds."

Mrs. Rowles cast a glance at the high step of the cart, for she was not so tall as she was tender; and Selsey Bill cast a glance at her,

balancing in the fine poise of his mind, whether or no he should venture to offer, as it were, to lift her. But he saw that it would not be just to his wife, who might come some day to hear of it—for you never can tell what those women will let out,—so he whipped forth his knife, and cut the cord which bound a dozen Sallies into one spire, and fetching out a basket, set it down upon the rim; so that Mrs. Rowles (though of good weight and measure) taking that for her first rung went up without a groan.

“You take next turn towards Harlington, and go along quiet as you can, Bill;” these were her orders, when she had settled down with a clean sack beneath her on the driving-board. “And now shall I tell you what I believe? It may be wrong, of course; we all are liable to horrors. You feels that yourself, Bill, though a man with such a family get’th more opportounities, so to say?”

“And a wife,” answered Bill; “her comes first to begin with.”

“In course, her comes first in the regular way. A good and faithful wife, and the mother of seventeen. But without such luck as that, I knows what men is; and I say to you, Bill Tompkins, that they differs very much. I makes

the very best of them, as is the duty of a woman, and leads to their repentance, when they has it in them. But most of them has not, without a word against my Teddy. And I say that this Lord Hopscotch here—if such is his name, being very doubtful—is up to some badness, having no belief of any one down this way to right it. Therefore you take that corner, Bill, and go on slowly till I tell you when to stop. Mind, I don't say I know what it is; but I can guess. We have had a many gay doings down this way, for all it looks so innocent, and perhaps for that same reason."

"What can 'em want with more childers, if that way inclined?" But the quiverful Bill dropped his essay on that subject; for there is much more bashfulness among poor people, than among their betters, on such topics of discourse.

Presently they came to a dark quiet elbow of the road, or rather of the track across the turf; for they had passed all stones and hedges now, and the wheels went softly upon grass and peat. A clump of Scotch firs, bowed by the west winds, overhung the way, and made it sombre as the grave. About a hundred yards before them was a low square building, on the verge

of the heath, and surrounded with bushes and something that looked like a wooden palisade.

"That's where it is. That is Struck-tree Cottage; the lightning come down and scorched the old oak." Mrs. Rowles spoke in a whisper, as if herself afraid of it. "You see there's a light in the parlour, Bill. That's where the villains is, I do believe, and the poor lady locked away upstairs, maybe. Now you go forrard, and just peep in. They'll never be capable of suspecting nothing; and everything will be black to them outside."

It was quite dark now, without moon or stars. *Spanker* and the cart, which was painted brown, could scarcely be descried even twenty yards away, and the Sallies were of unpeeled osier. Bill handed the reins to his sister-in-law, and got down in his usual lanky style. Although he was a very hard-working fellow, nothing could drive him into quick jerks; for his joints were loose, and were often heard to creak, when the wind was in the east, and the air too dry.

"But if them cometh at me?" he asked with proper prudence, and a sense of his importance to three crowded rooms at home. "Why, I ain't got so much as a stick to help me!"

“No fear, little Billy. Guilty conscience makes a coward. You need not let them see you. And if they do, why, they’ll take you for the Giant of the Heath—the old highwayman as was hanged in chains, not a hundred yards from here. My father seed him often; and when he fell down, he took to walking through the fuzz.”

“Oh Lor’, no more of that, ’Liza! All my teeth be gone a-chatterin’. Give us a sack at any rate, if I meets he.”

Mrs. Rowles, who was not very happy herself, handed him a spare sack from the cart; and Bill Tompkins, with many glances right and left, and heartily wishing himself at home, set forth towards the cottage, walking very slowly, and carefully shunning every stick and stone that was visible on the brown, inhospitable earth. As he passed beneath the shattered tree, he looked up with a shudder at the jagged fork, and naked stubs, and contorted limbs, expecting the dead highwayman to clank his ghostly chains. Then he stole on with more courage, for he was tolerably brave, at least as regarded fellow-beings in the flesh.

When he came to the fence, a low palisade of fir, he just lifted his long legs over it, without

casting about for any gate or door. As he groped along the fence towards the house, he discovered a gate which appeared to be locked, and observing that the palisade was much higher there, he very wisely lifted this gate from its hinges, and left room for himself to slip through at the back, if pursued, and obliged to retreat in a hurry. Then he made his way stealthily through some low shrubs to the corner of the cottage, and considered things.

It was quite a small building, with only four windows in front, and a door with a little porch between them. Two windows were on the ground floor, and two above; the windows of the downstairs rooms had outer shutters, or rather framed blinds of lattice-work, such as carpenters call "louvres." These were closed and fastened; but from the one on the right of the porch a strong light came through the interstices of the blind, and streamed in narrow slices on the misty gloom outside. The horizontal laths were turned at such an angle, that a man of common stature could only see the floor between them; but Selsey Bill was almost a giant, and hearing loud voices in that lower room, he approached the window stealthily, and standing on tiptoe applied one eye to the top

of the framework of the blind, where he found a wide slit between the beading and first lath. Through this he could see nearly all that was inside, for the curtains hung back at the end of the pole. Also he could hear pretty well what was said, for the window-glass was thin, and the ceiling low.

There were only two men in the room, both lounging in shabby armchairs near the fire, and smoking, yet not looking peaceful. Tompkins was surprised at this, because he could never have his own black pipe, with the cheapest and strongest tobacco to puff, and his own bit of fire to dry his sodden feet, without feeling as if he could stand anything from any one, even to the theft of his very last halfpenny by his youngest boy Bob, who was bound to know better, with so many rascals in front of him. And these rich gentlemen (for so they seemed) were smoking a fine blue curly cloud, such as a poor man can only put his nose to, when the putty is gone from the glass between him and his true superior.

Bill became deeply curious now. That gentlemen of such tip-top style, too grand almost for the world to carry, drinking rare stuff like the sun through church windows, and

smoking (as if it was so much dirt) cigars such as Bill knew by memory—for he had picked up a pretty fair stump sometimes—that they should be hob-nob in this little room (no better than his own Uncle Tompkins had), yet not at all hob by nob soft and pleasant, and looking fit to fly at one another, for two peas—all this must mean something as was natural for Police, if only they could be persuaded to do more than flap their white gloves in view of tricks that were Nobby. Mr. Tompkins applied a dry rasp to his lips with his knuckles, well fitted for that operation, which had many times saved the mouth from evil issue. Then he listened and gazed intently; as no man can do, who has had his powers spoiled by the higher education.

“Then it quite comes to this,” said the gentleman whose face was in full view to Bill, though by no means a fair view; “that you mean to throw me over, after all my risk, and take the fair spoil for yourself. I have known a good many cool things in my time; but this by long chalks is the coolest.”

“Take it at that same temperature,” answered the larger and younger man, who was lolling back, with the roof of his system exposed to Bill, who perceived therein a likeness to the

back of a yellow Skye dog who has not been combed very lately ; “ you have let yourself in for it, for the sake of filthy lucre ; and, alas ! it proves that I was entirely misinformed. Make the best of it, old man. You have rushed into a scrape. There is too much proof, I fear, that it is all your own doing. The law will be down upon you, and where is your defence ? There is one way, and only one, to hush it up. The girl must marry one of us, after what has happened. She has not got a sixpence, and she is wild with rage. Disappoints me there, after all my mother’s lessons. Don’t think you could tame her, Pots ; but feel sure that I could. Then here I step in, like the deuce from a machine, and magnanimously offer to make amends for my mistake. And instead of being grateful, you set to and slate me ! Consider what a lot of that I shall have from the mother.”

“ You can stand anything,” said the other, with a sigh ; “ but I am not as tough as I used to be ; and a row in the papers brings the duns in by the dozen. The girl is as sweet a woman as ever looked through a bridle. And I had set my heart upon her, when I thought she would have money. But I could not marry her like this, and be laughed at ever afterwards,

for eloping with a pauper. Can't you take her back to-night, and nobody the wiser? Then perhaps I can have her, in the proper course of things."

"Impossible, you thick old Pots. She has not tasted bit or sup for four and twenty hours; and her face it is a show, as the old women say. No, it must be reeled straight off this time. You can hear her moaning now; that old woman is a fool, and the little girl a rogue, who would betray us, if she could. But we are all right here; and to-morrow the fair Kitty will accept me as her deliverer. We shall make short work of it, and you retire blameless."

The other man began to growl, but Bill stopped not to hear him. His righteous soul was wild already, and his mercy flowed unstrained. Now and then there had come, as from an upper window, the sound of low sobbing, and the weariness of woe, when some human creature finds the whole world set against it, yet cannot get out of it to seek a better. Bill stepped quietly round the little porch, and stood beneath the window whence the sound appeared to come.

The window was over the kitchen, as it seemed, and the sill was about twelve feet from

the ground. But the kitchen blind was down, and the firelight dull within. Tompkins laid his sack along the kitchen window-sill, and stepping on it softly, could just reach the stone at the bottom of the bedroom window. With a little groping he contrived to get one foot upon the branch of a pear-tree, which was trained against the house, and lifting his tall frame warily, he got his chin upon the level of the window-sill above. The whole aperture was barred with stout wire-netting; but the lower sash had just been lifted to throw something out, something white like an eggshell, that flew by as Bill drew back.

“ Oh, you won’t have it, won’t you ? ” said a cross and cracky voice ; and Bill saw by the light of a guttering tallow-candle, an old woman going towards a young one who lay on a low iron bed with brass knobs at the corners. “ Well, you knows your own business best, and pretty airs you gives yourself. I tell you there ain’t nothing in it, but new-laid egg and good sherry wine, and you see me mix it up yourself. A pretty one you’ll be to go to church to-morrow, wi’out a bit of colour in your cheeks, or a bit of victuals in you. Cry, cry, cry, all the blessed day long, ’stead of being proud to stand up with a rich

gentleman! My patience with you are pretty well worn out, and a pretty dance you led me all last night! But I've got something in the kitchen as will force you for to swallow, something come a purpose this very day from Lunnon, and directions with it for the fractious folks. Now I try you fair once more, Miss, if Miss it is; and after that I try you foul, you see if I desn't."

But the lady, who lay with her face to the wall, and a mass of curly hair shining down her black dress, would not even look round, or make any reply, but just lifted one elbow, and then let it fall again.

"Very well! We'll see. Just you wait ten minutes, while I has a bit to eat myself; and then we'll try the little tickler. Nobody to thank but yourself, you know. If ever there was a cantankerous, sulky, self-willed young minx, and ungrateful to boot——"

The wicked old woman went muttering from the room, leaving the window still open, and the candle flaring and smoking on the chest of drawers, but locking the narrow door behind her with a rusty squeak of key.

"Now or never," thought Bill, who would have liked, deeply respectful as he was to the

fair sex, to have taken that old hag by the throat. With one hand he got a good grasp of the sill, while he passed the other through the wire grating, and raised the sash a little higher, to attract attention. But the fair prisoner was too far gone in distress and despair to heed any light sound, or even a creak and rattle.

“Miss, Miss, if you please, young Miss!” Bill put his mouth, which would open as wide as almost any cottage window, as far in as ever it would go (for the wire was much in his way) and blew his voice in. But whether it was from the “wealth of her hair”—as all our best writers express it—or the action of the throat upon the ears (which may have been sobbed into deafness), there she lay like a log, and as if no Bill Tompkins had his heart throbbing only for the benefit of hers.

“Rat they women!” thought Bill to himself. “If you want ’em to hear, can’t make ’em do it. If you wants to keep a trifle from ’em, cut both your feet off, and walk upon your funny-jowls. Here goes, neck or nort!”

He had pulled out a big wall-nail with a heavy shred attached, and choosing a wide space of the wire-netting, he flung it so cleverly at the head oppressed with sorrow, that the owner

jumped up, and looked about, and rubbed the eyes thereof.

"Hush, Miss, hush, for the Lord's sake hush!" whispered Bill, as if the first effect of feminine revival must be the liberation of the tongue; "it's only me, Miss,—Bill Tompkins from Sunbury. Please to come nigher, Miss, till I tell you."

"I don't understand. I seem lost altogether. They have locked me up here, and they may kill me, before I will do a single thing they want of me. What are you come for? And what makes you look at me? There is nobody to help me—not a person in the world."

"Lor' bless me, if this don't beat cock-fightin'!" As she tottered towards the window, with both hands upon her head, the light of the candle shone into her dazzled eyes, weak and weary as they were with floods of tears; and she waved her fingers over them with a strange turn of the palm (which was deeply cupped), a turn quite indescribable, a bit of native gesture which was most attractive, and certain to be known again, though it might have seemed to pass unnoticed. "Miss, if I ever see two ladies in my life, you be Miss Kitty, our Kit's sweetheart!"

“What is the good of a sweetheart to him? Don’t tell me anything, I can’t bear it. I was going to his funeral—his funeral, yesterday; and they put me in a carriage for the purpose; and they lost their way, so they said, and they brought me here. And instead of going to his funeral, I am to marry some one else. But I won’t do it. I’ll never marry any one but Kit; and Kit is dead, and gone to heaven.”

“The d—d liars! Did they tell you that?” cried Tompkins, as if that would never be my destination. “Our Kit, Miss, is as alive as you be; though he have had a bad time of it, and be gone to Ludred now. We expects him home next week, we does. And proud he would be, Miss, to see you there afore him. There never were such a chap to carry on about a gal, leastways beg pardon, Miss, I means a fine young lady.”

He was talking thus, because she could not speak; which he had the human kindness to perceive. “Is it true?” she was able to ask at last; and he answered—

“True as Gospel. S’help me Taters, Miss, it is!”

Then she knelt for a moment, to thank the Lord. But Bill said—“No time now, Miss.

Out of this you comes, this very minute, and home with me to Sunbury. Can't get out of window. Took good care of that. Come out of door, and slip downstairs."

"But she has locked me in," cried Kitty, "and there are two dreadful men downstairs. I don't care what they do to me now, now I know what you have told me. Go away, while you can. They will kill you."

"Just you go to that there door, and drive back the catch with this here knife. It's nothing but a gallows staple; and a rap with the butt end will send it back, ten to one it will, Miss. Put your hankercher over the lock, while you does it, and back it goes, if I know them locks. Have the can'le handy, to see where to hit. Then down to front door, and away to our cart. But don't lose my knife, for the Lord's sake. A sensible gal has always got two pockets."

Kitty, with her strength revived by spirit, took the big knife with an iron butt, and easily drove back the bolt, for the staple was an open one. Then Bill descended, without any noise, while she slipped gently down the stairs, and in the porch he met her. The front door had been bolted, but she drew back the bolt, and Bill took her hand, and she stood outside.

“Hallos! What’s up?” cried a voice from inside, for the catch had closed again with a loud snap.

“Run, Miss, run; while I stop these chaps,” shouted Bill, and she ran like a hare from a dog. For a moment or two Bill was able to hold the brass knob of the lock against the two from within; but presently it slipped from his hand, and the door flew open, and two men prepared to rush out. But Tompkins threw his sack at full length over the head of the foremost; and striking wildly down he came on his knees, and the other fell across him. Bill made off, like a shot, while they cursed one another; and before they were afoot again, he had slipped through the opening of the unhinged gate and pulled it after him. Then using his long legs rather slackly, but to great effect through the length of their stride, he took the struck tree for his landmark, and without thought of the ghost, soon had Kitty at his side, and they made off, hot foot, for the cart and Mrs. Rowles.

“Here you be, here you be!” shouted that good lady; “mind the ruts. The villains are after you.”

This was too true. Though they might not

have owned that description of themselves, two hasty men, without even a hat on, were rushing about, bewildered by the darkness and their own excitement, and taking the wrong way more often than the right. They fell among the furze, and got patterns on their faces, and showed no gratitude to Nature for one of her best gifts. But presently they spied the white nose of *Spanker*, which was hanging down with wonder if he ever should get home; and then they saw two figures in a bustle by the cart, and one was being helped in by the long stretch of the other.

“Stop thieves!” cried Sir Cumberleigh, who was dreadfully out of breath; and therefore perhaps he let the other form go first to stop them.

Then Bill turned round and faced them, and he said—“You get away! You ain’t got no right with this young leddy. And so help me God, I’ll smash you, if you offers for to touch her.”

He advanced with his great fists revolving like a windmill, that being our accepted view of the “art of self-defence.”

But Mrs. Rowles cried, “No, Bill!” while the other stood amazed at the height of his

antagonist and his uncouth look ; “ don’t soil your hand with him. Clap this upon his poll.”

Before Downy could guess what was meant, he was basketed. A big taper Sally, full of sharp stubs inside, was clapped down upon his yellow head, and fixed there staunchly, by a heavy rap from Bill’s great hand upon its bottom. Roars of pain and stifled oaths issued from it faintly, and the wearer fell down upon the grass and rolled, like a squirrel in his wheel, or a dog-fish in an eel-cruive.

“ Little one for t’other ! ” cried the clever landlady ; and in half a second Hotchpot was in the same condition.

“ Good night, Gen’lemen both,” shouted Bill, as he drove off. “ You goes to trap Miss Kitty, and you gets trapped, by Miss Sally.”

Mrs. Rowles laughed so loudly at this piece of wit, that her husband vowed he heard her plainly at the *Crooked Billet*.

CHAPTER IX.

A DREAM.

"COME and see who we have got here," wrote my Uncle, not quite grammatically; but the relatives are enough to puzzle any one who has not had Latin antecedents—if on the strength of good spirits I may venture upon a very ancient joke. I knew who it was; there could be no suspense or doubt. With those very brief words of his came a little note, in the hand that always made my hand shake.

"DARLING KIT," it said;

"I am so sorry to hear of your long and fearful illness. But thank God, you are getting better now, and will soon be as well as ever, I do hope. I cannot tell you what has happened, till you come, for it would only excite and worry you. It really seems as if there was something always to keep us from

one another. But we must try to get over it, my dear; and if we keep our trust in a Good Providence, we shall. Your Uncle is the kindest of the kind to me; and I am ever so much better, though I only came last night. I feel that I could wander all day long in these lovely gardens, with the blossoms, and the birds, and be as happy and as free from care as they are. But I am not to stay here, as your Uncle thinks it better that I should have two pretty rooms at Widow Cutthumb's, which are to be let very reasonably indeed, and I mean to write to ask my father for the money. You must not come back one day sooner, on account of my being here; mind that, or I shall be very angry with you. This is not because I do not long to see you, for you know better than that, dear Kit; but because I want you to get quite well, which is a great deal more to me than my own health. And so it always should be, if people love one another. Give my best regards to your Aunt, Miss Parslow, and tell her that I love dogs quite as much as she does. And I once had a dear little dog of my own, but he was taken from me. Now, mind what I say; for I will be obeyed; at any rate until I have to swear to the contrary, which is never carried out by

the ladies nowadays. My dear dear, I shall be afraid to look at you. They tell me you are so different from what you were. And I get long wrinkles up and down my forehead, if I ever allow myself to think of it; and though I try not to do it, it will come back again. But never mind; you will be as strong as ever when you have a good kiss from

“Your own KITTY.”

“Well, I call that something like a true love-letter;” my Aunt Parslow said, when she had contrived almost to compel me to show it to her, which I did not feel sure that I had any right to do. “That’s a true woman, though I never saw her. She thinks of you ten times as much as of herself; and no man can pretend to say that he repays it; even when he happens to deserve it; which has never happened to any gentleman I knew. You write, and you talk, and you go on with fine words, till people who listen to you believe, that you mean to give up your own ways altogether. And perhaps you do believe it, at the time, for you never know your own minds at all. But about three days of it—that’s all there is. I know it from friends of my own; though, thank God, I had sense

enough never to try it myself. And then it is, 'Mary, could you fill my pipe? It would be so sweet, dear, if you did it!' Or—'Louisa, I must have left my handkerchief upstairs. Did you happen to notice where I put it, dear?' And she is fool enough to run for it, and kisses him on the bottom step; and her life is a treadmill afterwards. Your Kitty is quite of that sort, mind. I can see it in every word she writes."

"Well, Aunt Parslow, and you would have been the same, if any gentleman had had the luck to offer you upon his altar."

"I believe I should," she answered, with a snap at first; and then she smiled slowly, and said, "No doubt I should, Kit. But try to be no worse than you can help with her."

If anything can rouse a lover's indignation—and there are too many things that do so—such a calm assumption of his levity and ferocity is the first to set it boiling. "What are you thinking of?" I asked, without even adding, "Aunt Parslow."

"I am pleased to see you in that state of mind," she continued; when gratitude alone preserved me, without even a half-glance at her twenty thousand pounds, from the mur-

derous speech that was on my tongue. "But you are very young, Kit. You will come to know better, when you have had enough of this sweet Kitty. Enough very soon becomes too much. And then what do you do? You neglect them, and think that you are very good indeed, if you do no worse."

Miss Parslow was not at all a spiteful woman; even too much the other way, if that can be. And of such things she could have no experience, because she had never risked it. But being deeply hurt, I said—"You know best."

She turned back into the house, with all her dogs at her heels; for none of them cared a bit for the air of heaven, in comparison with their own food and footstools. And I rather hoped that she would come out, and say—"You have been very rude to me; get you back to Sunbury."

Being in a fine large frame of mind—though the frame was too large for its contents, I trow—what did I do, but pull out my Kitty's letter, and begin it all again; just as if every word of it were not in my heart already? But it adds sometimes to the satisfaction of the heart, to be assured once more by the eyes and brain, that they knew what they were doing, when they brought it the good news.

The valley of the Mole was very lovely, in this flush of the fair Spring-tide. Bend after bend, bud after bud, tint upon tint, all as soft to the eye as the sense of them is to the spirit within; with the twinkle of the sun stealing through them shyly, as a youth, in the morning of his love, quivers as he glances at the beauty of his maiden. All these delights double their enchantment to the weak, as the lights of heaven multiply, when the eyes are full of tears.

Jupiter (who was the greatest light, at least of the earth, to Miss Parslow) ran up and sniffed at me, and said "Look out!" as clearly as the dog of a most observant and genial writer has learned to say it—up to the last advices. And after him came his mistress, no longer didactic, but deprecative. The beauty of woman is that they change so rapidly. Who does not love a Kaleidoscope?

"I have been thinking over your affairs," she said, that she might seem consistent; "and I find my first opinion quite confirmed. The moment I knew what your condition was, I said—as you must remember, Kit—'There is only one thing to do, and the sooner we get it done the better.' I will not place myself under any obligation to Mr. Henderson, though I feel

that he has behaved very well, in not coming over to bother me. I have sent down and ordered the fly with a pole—I forget what they call it, I dare say you know—and I have ordered the green room to be got ready. She must not think at all of her complexion in the glass. It will be as right as ever, when she gets downstairs.”

“I have no idea what you mean, Aunt Parslow. But you must not be put out, because I was always slow.”

“And they talk of the masculine mind! Oh dear, any girl of your age would have known in a second. There is such a place as Leatherhead. Isn’t there now?”

“Beyond a doubt. And you the first lady in it.”

“Very well. And there is such a place as Sunbury, and a road between them, though not at all a good one. Well then, at Leatherhead there is a young man, crotchety, grumpy, whatever you like to call him, but horribly stubborn, and possessed with one idea. And at Sunbury there is a young lady to be found, very little better, I dare say, and possessed with the same idea, only upside down, as women are supposed to see everything. They have got it into their

stupid heads, that they cannot live without one another. It would cost more to take the young man to her, and perhaps he would never come back again. It is cheaper to fetch the young lady to him; though it can't be done under a guinea. And the fly with two horses will start in half an hour."

I told her she was the best woman in the world; and she answered that I was a hypocrite, yet seemed pleased with my hypocrisy. Then we had a debate whether Kitty would come, in which I maintained the negative, for the sake of being convinced, not against my will.

"You are a perfect stupe," said my aunt, with sound judgment; "you don't know what a woman is, half so well as *Jupiter*. Not to talk of affection, or any of that stuff, a woman thinks ten times as much as a man does of the wickedness of wasting money. If I went myself, she would think I came for a drive, and her conscience would be easy. If I sent one horse, she would hesitate a great deal, if she did not want to come. But when she sees two horses and an empty carriage, do you think she would let the man get all the money for nothing? It would take four horses going the other way, to prevent her jumping in and saying, 'Well,

I suppose I must.' I shall write her a very pretty note, of course. You had better not be well enough to send anything but your love."

I was only afraid that Uncle Corny might take it as rather a slur upon him, to have his new visitor stolen like this. But Miss Parslow (who was always extremely desirous to have her own way, when her mind was made up) declared that she would make that all right with him. And so she did, by reasoning which I did not try to penetrate, and which she put vaguely in her note to him. For it was something about clothing, and deficiency of wardrobe, which men cannot understand, and are impressed with readily, when the duty of paying for it falls on some one else.

"Not that I intend to pay," said Miss Parslow, in confidence to me, though my Uncle was led by her letter to a contrary conclusion; "but my credit is good in Leatherhead. I shall get a few things of a becoming style and tone for her, and have the bill made out to Professor Fairthorn. Messrs. Flounce and Furbelow may have only got one window, but they get their goods direct from Paris; and I see from their circular they expect a large consignment of very chaste articles, and the latest mode, to-morrow.

It will be most fatiguing at my time of life. But if I like the girl, as I know I shall, I can scarcely refuse her the benefit of my judgment."

"I think I shall go down the hill a little way, and see what they have got in the window now," I answered, for the two horses now had been gone some four hours; "and then I shall know the old stuff, if they attempt to mix it with the latest mode. You can scarcely be too sharp in these little places. It is not that they want to cheat anybody, and they would rather not do it to a native. But I should just like to see how much they have got now."

"Ah, there is a fine view from the pavement there. You can see right into Middlesex, and even Berkshire, I am told, when the day is unusually fine. But I never knew it fine enough to see five miles. You might as well go and play with the dogs, my dear."

To play with the dogs was very well in its way, and had lightened many a listless hour, when the body was slack for its to and fro of action, and the mind could take no food, except as a dog bites grass. Then the tricks of the doggies, their sprightly flashing eyes, and perception of one's meaning almost before it knew itself, as well as their good nature and enjoy-

ment of a joke, and readiness to time their wits by the slower pulse of mine—take it as I would or might, here was always something to teach me that one is not every one.

But I could not see the beauty of this lesson now. Selfish love had got me by the button-hole, and there never is much humour in the tale he tells. It is all about himself, and the celestial one who sent him; and he is so much in earnest that he cannot bear a laugh. Even the crinolines in the little narrow window of Messrs. Flounce and Co., where they had to hang alternate, one high and one low, not to poke each other's ribs, although they reminded me of what I had seen in church, suggested it without a single smile to follow; for my mind, in the reverence of love, was able to people them with the sacred form inside. And yet at any other time I must have laughed, recalling as it did the ingenuity of ladies, who contrived in our narrow pews to reconcile their worship of a Higher Power with that of their own frocks. And the ladies who now go limp may be glad—when fashion comes round in its cycle—to remember how their mothers made the best of it. Each lady alternate stood on a high hassock, each lady intermediate upon the

church boards; and so their cages underlapped or overlapped each other; and when it came to kneeling one could hear them all contract. There were quite as clever women then in balloons, as those who end in serpents now.

Vainly I looked down the hill, and vainly back at the crinolines. The only way to get the thing desired is to leave off hoping for it. When the sun was gone, and the silver mist was gliding like a slow-worm up the vale, and all the good people of Leatherhead had lit their pipes and come out to talk, I went back slowly to Valley-view, with many a futile turn of head, and ears too ready to be deceived. But the only wheels I heard were those of the fish-monger's cart going quite the wrong way, for I knew that he had been with a middle cut of salmon to the hospitable gate of Miss Parslow.

"You had better go to sleep. Here is Betty nearly wild," my aunt cried as she pushed me in; "that blessed butcher has only just sent the lamb, and the boy let it fall in the middle of the road. I hope to goodness, she won't come for two hours. If she does, she will want sandwiches; and there is nothing in the house to make them of. Go and lie down, Kit; don't you see you are in the way? What a lucky

thing I told the man to rest the horses for at least two hours at the *Flowerpot*. When he gets into the tap, he is pretty sure to make it four. You look as white as a ghost, poor boy! Bother that love, it spoils everybody's dinner! I haven't got a bit of appetite myself; and the first bit of salmon for the season, except one! Go in, get in; lie down there and roll. Why, you couldn't even tell where to find the mint!"

This was all the sympathy I got in my distress; and when she had poked me into the little room, or lobby, with a horsehair sofa, where to roll meant to roll off, she locked me up, as if I had been a pot of jam; and all I could hear was the rattle of the dripping-pan, or the clink of the plates in the warmer. It was worse than useless to repine; so I turned my back to everything and went to sleep.

In sleep, as it has been said of old, the fairest and sweetest gifts of heaven descend upon helpless mortals. Then alone is a man devoid of harm, and gone back to his innocence, and the peopling of his mind is not an array of greed and selfishness. Then only is he far away from malice, and corrupting care, and small impatience of the wrongs (which only sting, when they strike himself), and bitter sense of having

failed through the jealousy of others. And only then—if his angel still returns, though seared and scouted—does he know the taste of simple joys, and smile the smile of childhood. What wonder then that his Father comes, with returning love to him, while he sleeps?

Then if the greatest gift of God to man, that he can see and feel while in this lower world of life, is that which was the first vouchsafed,—the love of one, who thinks and tries to make him nobler than herself—though she generally fails in that—how can it come more gently to him than as it came, the first time of all, when he has been cast into deep sleep?

It seemed to be no time for words, and even thoughts found little room. Without a whisper or a thought, my cheeks were wet with loving tears, and gentle sobs came to my heart, and faithful hands were locked in mine. A sweeter dream never came from heaven; and if sleep were always so endowed, it would be well to sleep for ever.

CHAPTER X.

URGENT MEASURES.

MISS PARSLow, although she pretended to be rough, and to love dogs better than the human race (for which she could give fifty reasons), was as truly soft of heart as the gentlest woman that ever shed a tear. She kept her own history to herself; and it never struck me that she had any. That is to say, as concerning us men; who are always supposed to be, but are not always, the side to be blamed, when things go amiss in the matter of sweethearting. She had passed through some trouble in her early days, as I found out long afterwards; but had not been soured thereby, any more than a river has been poisoned by its tumbles in the hills.

The spell of Kitty's beauty and true goodness fell upon her. At first she strove hard to make light of her, and then pretended still to do so, when the effort was in vain; but in three

days' time it was all over; and I felt that with all my claims of kindred, and the proud Parslow extract of tea in my veins, I was chiefly regarded as Kitty's sweetheart. It was—"Where is Kitty? What would Kitty like for dinner? Did Kitty tell you, what she thought of this parasol? Tell Kitty that I am waiting for her down the garden." And so on, until I began to smile, and to fear that I should never have my Kitty to myself. And the beauty of it was that Miss Parslow seemed to think that I was not so attentive as I should be to Miss Fairthorn.

"What did you mean, by carrying on as you did with that girl, Sally Chalker?" she inquired one day in a very stern voice, when I had only asked Miss Chalker if she was fond of roses. "Are you such an oaf as to think that Sally Chalker is fit to wipe the shoes of Kitty Fairthorn? And if it is her money that tempts you, remember that her father is a most determined man. And there used to be such a thing as honour among young men. What will Mr. Henderson say, when I tell him, as I shall at the first opportunity, that you take advantage of being on the spot, to try to cut him out with his precious Sally? And I believe that he really is attached to her."

There is no end of the bubbles that ladies blow, when they once begin to dabble in love-affairs. They never can let well alone, and they have such a knack of setting one another's hackles up, that when I hear now of any match being off, where I knew that the young people loved each other, I never inquire about stern parents, but ask who the sisters and female cousins are.

Even Kitty, the best and most sensible girl that ever wore a bonnet, began to think at last that there must be something in all this rubbish. I observed that she coloured, and glanced at me, whenever Miss Chalker's name came up, as it did pretty often, entirely through my aunt, who would toss it about, as a dog throws a bone, when he has exhausted all its grease. And I used to look down, as if I were thinking very deeply. Perhaps she would love me more, if she grew jealous.

Then she began to sigh, softly at first, and not enough for me to be sure of it; but by and by more deeply, as she found me too polite to be aware of this exertion of an undoubted private right. And she used to say—"Oh, I do admire her, so much! I think she is so lovely. Don't you quite agree with me, Kit?"

And I used to say—"Most perfect. Can there be any doubt about it?" And then she would not look at me, perhaps for half an hour.

I know that this was very wrong of me—as wrong as well could be. And I used to steal a glance at Kitty, when she was not watching, and ask myself if any man with two eyes in his head could turn them twice on Sally Chalker, after such a view as that. However I did not say so; for I felt that my darling should know better, and if she chose to be like that, why she must, until she came to reason; and that was her place, more than mine. But I could not bear to hear her sigh.

Miss Parslow rather enjoyed this business, which was a great deal worse of her than anything that I did. For she herself had set it going, with no consideration for my feelings, and no right whatever. And I think that she ought to have healed the mischief, which she could have done at any moment; whereas she pretended not to see it, although she was much too sharp for that.

However it could not go on long, and I had made up my mind to clear it up, when I was saved the trouble. For as I sat in my favourite place, with the lovely valley before me, and the

sun sinking into a bed of roses far beyond the Surrey hills, I heard the little pit-a-pat that was dearer than my pulse to me, and down the winding walk came Kitty, carrying an ugly yellow book. She had no hat on, and her hair was tied back, as if it had been troubling her; and as soon as she saw me she turned away her head, and hastily passed her hand over her cheeks, as if to be sure that they were dry. Then she looked at me bravely, though her mouth was twitching, and said—"Oh, will you do it for me, if you please?"

"Do what?" I asked very reasonably, though I began to guess what she was thinking of; for the ugly book was a Railway Guide.

"Miss Parslow told me to ask you. She cannot make it out any more than I can. It is very stupid, of course; but she says that she never met a woman who could make out Bradshaw, and she would strictly avoid her, if she ever did."

"But what is it I am to make out? We can't get to Sunbury, by any line, my darling." When I called her that, her dear eyes shone; but she went on, as if she were correcting them.

"What I want to make out is a good quick train, without any extra fare to pay, from

London to Glasgow; and it must arrive by daylight, though I suppose it would have to start at night for that. But I am not at all afraid."

"What on earth has got into this lovely little head?" I made offer to take it between my two hands, as I had been allowed to do, once or twice, when apparently falling back in health. But it seemed to prefer its own support just now.

"You must be aware, if you will take the trouble to think for a minute about it, that I cannot remain here in this sort of way, living upon a perfect stranger, although she is goodness and kindness itself; and running into debt in a country place like this, just because I have got no money. The only thing for me is to find out my father. He may be delighted to receive me now, and I may even be able to help him there. Miss Parslow has promised most kindly to lend me quite money enough to get to Glasgow. I must write to my father by this evening's post, and then I shall be able to start to-morrow; only I must let him know what train I am likely to arrive by, for his time is always occupied."

"A very nice programme!" I exclaimed, as

she smiled, or tried to smile, at her own powers of arrangement. "But if you please, Miss Fairthorn, what am I to do?"

"You must not ask me," she said, turning away; "there are so many things for you to do. Soon you will be able to be at work again. And if you don't like that, you can marry some one with plenty of money, and keep racehorses. I dare say it is a nice life, for those who like it."

"I cannot make out a word of this," I answered; "people with money, and racehorses! And going to Glasgow by the train all night! Do try to tell me, dear, what it is all about."

"It is only natural that I should go to my father, when nobody wants me. I am not blaming any one. You must not imagine that. I have only myself to blame, for believing that I was a great deal more than I was."

"When nobody wants you! Oh, Kitty, Kitty, I must be gone off my head again; and that is why you want to run away from me. Look at me honestly, and say that it is so. I would rather give you up, dear, and go mad by myself; than marry you, if that has once got into your mind."

She looked at me with terror, and deep amazement; then fell into my arms, and threw her own around me, and put up her lips as a cure for every evil.

"How can you say such wicked things?" she whispered, as soon as I allowed her sweet lips room. "You can have no idea what I am, if you suppose that I should ask whether you were off your head, or on it, when once I had given all my heart to you. But you must not have anybody else in your head."

"As if I ever could!"

"Oh, but yes, you might."

"I should like to know who it could be then. As if there were any one in all the world fit to hold a candle to my own Kitty."

"There's a much prettier girl in this very place, if she did not stick her elbows out so sadly, as she walks, and put her heels on the ground before her toes. And if she had not got—well, not quite green eyes."

"Somebody else has green eyes, I should say, if they were not as blue as heaven. Sally Chalker? Why, I would not touch her with a pair of tongs. And if I did, Sam Henderson would take the poker to me."

"Oh, Kit, can you assure me, upon your word

of honour, that there is nothing between you and Miss Chalker?"

"No, I can't. Because there is the whole world between us, and what is more than ten times the whole world to me, a certain little Kitty, who has no fault whatever—except that she is desperately jealous."

"Jealous indeed! You must never think that. I hope I have a little too much faith in you," she said, as she came and coaxed me with her hand, making me tremble with her love and loveliness.

But I said, "Confess, or I will never let you go;" and she looked up and laughed, and whispered—

"Well then, perhaps—but only ever such a wee bit."

Miss Chalker's ears must have tingled after that; for I called her a vulgar and commonplace girl—which was not at all true—and a showy dressy thing, and I know not what, until Kitty came warmly to the rescue; for she seemed to like her very greatly, all of a sudden, and found out that she walked quite gracefully. Then I took the hateful Bradshaw, and tied a flat stone in it, and flung it over the tops of the trees into the Mole. And when we

went in, as the dinner-bell rang—for Miss Parslow kept fashionable hours now—that good lady looked very knowing, and asked with a smile which was meant to be facetious, whether I had seen Miss Chalker lately.

“I saw her sticking her elbows out down the street, and putting her heels to the ground before her toes,” I answered; and true enough it was, though I had never observed those little truths before. Miss Parslow stared, and Kitty gave me such a glance, that I resolved to have honourable amends, or do worse.

“You won’t have much more chance of running down our local belles,” said my Aunt, as she handed me a letter; “Mr. Henderson passed in his dog-cart just now, to see the young lady who does such dreadful things, and he kindly brought this letter from your Uncle to me. He seems in a great hurry; how unreasonable men are! I think he might have come and paid his respects to Miss Fairthorn, even if he did not think me worthy of that honour. Read it aloud. He is a diamond, no doubt; but I think he should be treated as the Koh-i-noor has been.”

Knowing Uncle Corny’s style, I read without surprise—

“DEAR MADAM,

“Kit has had quite time enough to get well. I am tired of being here all by myself, and I want him in the garden, for at least three weeks before he is married, which I mean him to be then, if Miss Fairthorn will kindly agree to it. Placed as she is, she will see the sense of that; for it is the only way to make her safe. And I wish her to be married here at Sunbury, in our old church, where I have always had a pew. I shall send the tax-cart for Kit to-morrow, and he will arrange with the lady to come before Sunday to Widow Cutthumb’s, where I will take uncommonly good care that nobody molests her. On Sunday the banns will be read for the first time, with Miss Fairthorn’s full permission, and nobody else’s, so far as I care. We shall hope for the honour of your presence, when the young people are joined together. Thanking you, Madam, for your kindness to my nephew, and with my best respects,

“I am faithfully yours,

“CORNELIUS ORCHARDSON.”

“Well, my dear Kitty,” said my Aunt, when I had finished; “he disposes of you as calmly

as if you were a bushel of apples, or a sack of potatoes. I thought it was the lady's place to fix the auspicious day."

"You cannot expect a bachelor to be at home among such questions;" I came to my love's rescue, for she knew not what to say, and was blushing, and looking down, and wondering what to make of it. "But I must go to-morrow, if he sends for me. If old *Spanker* came for nothing, I should never hear the last of it. My Uncle has heard something, which we do not know of. He is prompt, and to the purpose; but I never knew him rash."

"I see, I see;" Miss Parslow's voice was much subdued, for she loved a bit of mystery, and saw tokens of it here. "Don't let us talk about it now, until we've had our dinner. Kit's last bachelor dinner here! We'll have a bottle of Champagne, to make us laugh a little at this peremptory wedlock. Your Uncle is a curious man; but if it comes to that, all men are very curious beings."

"And ladies are so, in the other sense, and the active one of the word; but we are never known to complain of that."

"Of course you never have any secrets.

Take your everlasting in to dinner, and I will follow you. All the world will have to do that by and by, if you only keep up to this high mark of constancy and devotion."

Kitty smiled at me, and I smiled at Kitty; for we knew that any lower mark might do for other people.

Lofty and good as she was, my Aunt could scarcely be expected to see things thus. A lady who has never been up a ladder, is afraid of her skirts, even more than of her head. Aunt Parslow was not at all strait-laced—for she had given up caring about her figure now—but she did think that Kitty and I were almost too much wrapped up in one another; and perhaps that was why, in her feminine style, she had brought Miss Chalker, or vainly tried to bring her, in between us.

On the following day, the spring-cart arrived, with Selsey Bill's biggest boy sitting up to drive; and away I went with nothing truly settled, but everything left elastic; as happens nearly always, when the women have their way. I promised to bring Uncle Corny to reason (as the ladies viewed that substance), and to come back the next day but one, if wet bandages enabled the old horse to do it again.

He was wiry enough, but his wire was stiff, and some of the connections rickety.

“Kit, you are a fool,” Mr. Orchardson said, as soon as he had done the outside talk; “do you mean to have that girl, or not?”

I assured him that I hoped quite as warmly and wholly to marry my beautiful darling, as I did to be alive for the purpose of doing it, now that the Lord had restored my health.

“Then look alive,” he answered, “or you will never do it. She is not safe even where she is. I am not going to tell you what I know, because you would think me fanciful; only I say that if it was my case, I would not lose a day that is not demanded by manners and decency. You have her father’s consent, and hers. You are surrounded by wily foes. I have explained everything to Mr. Golightly; he is a sensible man, and he does not care twopence for Miss Coldpepper, for she never gives a sixpence she can help towards the church. Widow Cutthumb will take fourteen shillings a week, including coals and candles. Two weeks done properly will make three Sundays, and you will be both in the parish. I have got an old door, which I mean to put up, to keep people from landing in her garden, and I defy them

to get into the house from the street. I believe they don't know where your Kitty is at present; but they will find out; and what can that old maid, with all her lap-dogs, do to protect her? If you mean your Kitty to be ever Mrs. Kit, you must look sharp, and no mistake."

I was much surprised at his urgency, but could get no more reasons out of him. Being equally urged by love, and strong distrust of coming dangers, I did not lose a single day, but wrote to Miss Parslow by the very next post, because she required, and indeed deserved, to have a voice in all we did. Then I took the young horse on the following day, for old *Spanker* found himself a little stiff, and brought back my darling to her beloved Sunbury, where she had made up her mind to dwell. Widow Cutthumb received her with curtseys and smiles, and a very strong sense of her own importance. For the whole village now was on tiptoe about us, and everybody seemed to take our side.

But if I stopped to tell a thousandth part of what was said, I should never get married, which is the main point.

It must not be supposed that my Kitty all this time had neglected her dear father. She

had written to him several times from Leatherhead, enclosing a note or two from Miss Parslow, as well as a few little bills for soft goods. And he had replied in the most affectionate manner, and enclosed some cash. This encouraged her now to write for more; and he behaved most handsomely, considering how the other party had been making boot upon the products of his brain. But he was a true philosopher, and money to him was not the motive power of life, nor even the shaft, but only the lubricator. He promised to be with us, if he could; and his wife being still away in North Wales, there seemed to be no sound reason why he should fear to come to London. Indeed it seemed natural that he should come, before leaving England upon his long cruise, for the *Archytas*—as the ship was called—had now been completed in every detail, and was trying her engines at Greenock. And so we hoped to see him upon the blissful day.

CHAPTER XI.

TWO TO ONE.

“NEVER wur any luck in a wadding, as wur put off from app'inted day. For why? Why, because it be flying in the vace of the Lard, as hath app'inted 'un.”

Knowing that Tabby was very often right in her prophecies, and could prove them right—even when they were wrong—as most prophets can, I begged her not to say a word about that to my darling; because she was a little superstitious, although sprung from the very highest form of science. But science very seldom keeps its dates; and to make them tally, we had postponed our day from Tuesday even till Thursday. For Captain Fairthorn had written again, to say that he could not be with us on the Tuesday, but was almost sure that he could manage it, if we would only leave it till two days later. My Uncle had frowned

and said—"Not a single hour. If his wheels and his wires are more to him than his only child, let him stop with them. But you must leave it to Kitty. Such a question is for her."

Vexed as I was, I could not deny this. And she pleaded so well, though with reason on her side, that we vented our anger on the absent man, and only our affection and good will on her.

But the one who made the greatest grievance of it was my Aunt, Miss Parslow. She had hurried her dressmaker to the verge of mutiny, and made her sit up (either in person, or by deputy) two whole nights, and she felt that she would have to pay deeply for this, and now here it was all needless! "I have the greatest mind not to come at all," she wrote; "and if it were for anything but pure compassion, you may be quite sure that I would wash my hands of you. Men manage everything in this world, even the things that they understand least; and you will see what comes of it. If I come on Thursday, I shall be quite unprepared; though I should have been in perfect readiness on Tuesday."

This was a hard saying; but we agreed that she knew what she meant, and could explain it

to her liking. And seeing that the ladies were now so full of reason, I thought that I would have another try at Miss Coldpepper.

I had ventured to call upon that lady once, while the preparations were in full swing; but she had said that she was not at home, and of course she must know best, though I had seen her walking in her great Camelia-house. My Uncle Cornelius had been of opinion that, even if she would not honour our church with her presence, she could scarcely escape from the duty of sending her former visitor and favourite something very handsome as a wedding present. A silver tea-service was the least thing he could think of, but unluckily the last thing that occurred to her as needful. She had made it a grievance, as she wanted one, that Miss Fairthorn should have dared to go to Widow Cutthumb's, when everybody in the village knew how shockingly the widow had behaved to Mrs. Marker.

But all this appeared to me to be very small talk now; for I was in a generous and large condition, such as is only too apt to credit all fellow-creatures with the like expansion. It should never be said of me, that any petty pride had prevented me from holding out the olive-

branch—whether to be gilded, or even to be peeled—at a time when I was hoping to be crowned with myrtle. Scorning all considerations of a silver teapot, I went to Coldpepper Manor, and rang gently.

“Missus will see you this time,” said my friend Charles, who had tasted our strawberries many a time, when he durst not steal any more at home; “she is all agog about you, sir, though she shams to know nothing. Happiness to you and dear Miss Kitty, sir!”

The least I could do was to give him half a crown, for he had always appeared to me to be a worthy fellow. He slipped it into his hornet-coloured waistcoat, and bawled out “Mr. Christopher Orchardson,” as if I had come in a coach and four.

“I am pleased to see you, Mr. Orchardson,” said the lady of the Hall, as I made a low bow; “take a chair, and tell me what you are doing. I never hear anything that happens in the village.”

I am not at all certain what reply I made, being fluttered by the force of habit in her stately presence. But she was better pleased by this, than she would have been by any assumption of ease and self-command.

“Although I hear so little, a report has reached me,” she went on with a smile which was not at all disdainful, “that you are about to marry Kitty Fairthorn. If so, you are a wonderfully fortunate young man.”

“It would add very greatly to our happiness, madam,” I ventured to say, though with some misgivings, “if you would be kind enough to give us your good wishes. Miss Fairthorn has not been to call upon you, because—because she was not sure that you would wish it. And she is acting entirely without the consent of her step-mother, who is your sister. I hope you will not think the worse of her for that. The lady has never been very kind to her.”

“Kitty was quite right in not coming here; it would have placed me in an unpleasant position. I have not seen much of my sister for years. But I cannot enter into such matters. And you have done right in coming to me thus. Certainly you both have my good wishes. And though Kitty might have looked for a much higher marriage—I may say that without any disrespect to you—I believe that she will be happier in a very simple life. You will understand that I cannot be present—under the peculiar circumstances. Neither will you

expect me to receive Kitty here, when she is Mrs. Orchardson; she is no relative of mine, and she has chosen her own path. But I like her none the less, and you may tell her that. She has plenty of proper pride, and would resent my patronage. I was told that the wedding was to be to-day. Why have you put it off? You are unwise."

She looked as if she knew something which would alarm me, if declared; but I did not presume to ask about it, and simply told her the cause of the delay.

"You may expect him; but you will not see him," she answered, as if she knew more than we did; "don't put it off another day, if you wish it to be at all. But it is no affair of mine. Good morning to you."

I returned in an anxious state of mind, for she had clearly dismissed me, that I might ask no questions. And instead of going straight to my Uncle's house, I hurried to that of the widow, to make sure that my darling was safe, and all due care observed. After what had been already done to Kitty, how could I tell that there was no plot yet in store? My bodily strength was restored by this time, and I felt myself a match for almost any man; and surely

intense and incessant devotion must vanquish unholy pursuit and vile designs. All we knew of our enemies at present was that they had retired from the scene of their defeat, and locked up the cottage where they had felt so sure of victory. But my Uncle Cornelius had good reason for believing that his premises were watched; and a couple of his men had been tempted to drink by some mysterious stranger, who showed the greatest interest in our ways, and works, and manners. And the worst of it was that the river (being almost at our doors, and not frequented then as it is now) afforded such a space for roguish travel, that there ought to be a paling put up against it, with tenter-hooks, and wire-netting on the top, if any man desired to keep his garden to himself. For the people who come up, as they get away from London, seem to claim the country more and more, and to think that it was made for nothing else except to be a change for them; and they reason that as a river must have banks, those banks are a part of it, and the whole belongs to them.

My beloved (who was both my banks, and the channel of all my life as well) had not been left alone all this time, with only Widow Cut-

thumb to amuse her. Otherwise she would have had a sorry time; for that widow had but two subjects of discourse—the merits of her late husband, and the scarcity of all vegetables. But a very sharp young lady, Miss Gertrude Triggs, about three years older than my Kitty, being in need of country air after an attack of nettle-rash, had kindly consented to come and occupy the best room at Widow Cutthumb's. At first I was uneasy, for if Kitty were to catch that complaint, after all her other troubles, was she likely to look well upon the bridal day? But Dr. Sippets, said that he would warrant no infection; and so Miss Triggs came and occupied. And certainly she helped to set off the complexion, upon which it was impossible to imagine any rash. At first, I was not fond of Miss Triggs, for she had too much sting in her words and ways; and I made no allowance for what she had been through. And to my mind women should never try to sting, being apt to get the worst of it (as even do the bees), and intended more by nature to do the honey-making. But my poor ideas have always been old-fashioned; and I am sorry (for the sake of others) that it should be so.

But when I came to understand Gerty

Triggs, and to value her real friendship for my dear one, I acknowledged (as a man should do) that I had been a gaby. Not only had she protected Kitty at school, and even lent her under-clothing when she got no supplies from her step-mother, but she had actually made an inroad into Bulwrag Castle, to try a round with the great lady herself, on behalf of the innocent captive. She was rapidly discomfited, of course; she had resolved to show the truth, but she was quickly shown the door; and though she maintained that she had triumphed, it may have been in logic, but it was not so in fact; and the result to herself had been this nasty nettle-rash. However, as she got over that, and put the air of our garden upon her cheeks, I began to esteem her, and to find her rather pretty.

It was settled by the laws of nature that she should be bridesmaid; and Uncle Corny found another not connected much with trade, yet able to provide her own outfit. My Uncle said, though not to Kitty—for he was quite a gentleman to her throughout—that he could not discover any call on him to fit everybody up with gew-gaws. It was her father's place, if he wanted things to be done in proper style, to

come and see to them himself, or at any rate to send directions, and the money to have them carried out. Instead of that, he had left everything to us, kept us in trouble about the day, and perhaps driven off Miss Parslow, and her twenty thousand pounds. It was plain that he thought it a higher duty to fit out his ship than his only child. Considering all this, Uncle Corny was only surprised at his own generosity ; but when I joined him in that surprise, he cut me very short, and asked what I knew about him. It was natural enough that he should be cross ; and I told him so, which only made him worse.

Nevertheless when the true day came, which I always recall with gratitude and wonder at a grace so far beyond my merits, everybody behaved as if there were nothing but peace and good will in the world. We received a telegram quite early that the ship was ordered to sail that day, and the Captain could only send his blessing. Kitty shed some tears, but all the rest of us were pleased, because it fulfilled our predictions. And my Uncle was proud to give the bride away, and at the same time to keep her, as he neatly said.

Miss Parslow came over in style, with a mass of white flowers piled high on the seat before

her, and wearing her silver gray silk dress, which set her off to great advantage. And she presented the bride with a silver basket, fit either for flowers or fruit, and containing a very neat cheque for a hundred guineas. Sam Henderson acted as my best man, and did everything better than I did, for I scarcely knew my right hand from my left. Mrs. Wilcox was present, and so was Mrs. Rowles, without whom we should never have been there, and Selsey Bill of course, and every man who possessed a top hat in the parish. And to our amazement, Miss Coldpepper was sitting in her curtained pew, although she had said that she would not come. And after the service she kissed my Kitty, and said that she would give her something by and by.

What my darling wore I have not the least idea, or at least I had not on that day, though I came to know too well afterwards. But all the men said, and nearly all the women too, that she was the fairest, and sweetest, and most lovely of all the brides ever seen in Sunbury, which was no little thing to say; for our village is celebrated in that way. And she behaved with such grace and goodness, that it seemed as if those blessings must be multiplied upon her.

Several women cried to think that she should look so Christian, after all the treatment that she had received—for Mrs. Rowles declared that she had been in a wire-cage—and if I were to try to straighten half the crooked tales they told, I never should find any time for a separate word with Kitty.

Only I remember that when she came and kissed me, in her simple, and loving, and bewitching way, I saw the gleam of tears in her deep blue eyes; and when I asked (without words) what it was, she answered—

“I should have liked to have one kiss from father.”

This proof of her tenderness increased my adoration; for an affectionate daughter must become a loving wife. Then I took away my treasure to be mine alone; and Kit and Kitty, for the time, are one.

CHAPTER XII.

UNDER THE GARDEN WALL.

NOT much time could we have together in the land of Goshen, where the boils and blains of the ungodly world are not yet sprinkled in the radiant air. Uncle Corny gave us for our honeymoon one week—which has often proved much longer than the silver cord would stretch—but we, intending all our lives to be of sparkling sweetness, cared very little where we spent the hours, if only with each other. And perhaps we scarcely deserved to be in a place so calmly beautiful, not so far away as to take a cliff of money to get there, and yet having fine brave crags of its own. Perhaps it may be found in ancient charts as Baycliff, although it is such a quiet homely place, without any Railway to advertise it, that I have seen some maps which were too good to give the name. But they could not annihilate it by such petty silence; and a pleasant seaside village is like a

pleasing woman ; the less it is talked about, the more it keeps its charms.

For my part, I could not see the need of going back in such hot haste to Sunbury, dearly as I loved that desirable village. For here were many things that we could never have there, the level space and leisure of the many-coloured sea, the majesty of cliffs white-browed with centuries of tempest, the gliding of white sails across the gleaming ruffle of the cove, and the crisp elastic sands that kept the fairy trace of Kitty's feet close to my great clumsy prints.

"Let us steal another week," I said ; "it is but a fleeting holiday, and we shall never know such a time again."

But my beloved, growing dearer every day, if that could be, gave good advice, against her own delight, that we should not begin our married life with selfishness. We had been so kindly treated that we must not slur our gratitude, and forget our duties in our joys.

"And I want to see our little home," she said, to make the best of it ; "the house that is to be all our own ; where I shall keep you in order, Kit, and make you as happy as the day is long."

So with many a backward glance, we left that bower of bliss, and returned to the world

of work and action. And when we found what had been done, to welcome and to please us, we could not help confessing that our virtue was well rewarded. For Honeysuckle Cottage looked as bright and fresh as sunrise, and the first half of May is not the time to find much fault with nature. The earth was damp and clammy yet, in places where the wind and sun could not get fairly into it; and the Spring was late and shivered still among the gaps it had to stop. For one might look through a big tree yet, and see a lamp in the road beyond it; and many of those that were being scarfed wore spangles rather than patins. And people, who pay little heed, might stop in doubt—if they stopped at all—and wonder if what they saw coming out might prove in the end to be a blossom or a leaf.

In our little house I had the bud, the blossom, and the fruit combined. The bud of youth scarce come to prime, the blossom of fair womanhood, and the fruit of sweet and golden peace, not sleepy, but sprightly flavoured. It was a fair view from the window, but inside ten times as fair; without the chance of adverse weather nipping hope and bright content.

An ancient writer (whom I had just been

scholar enough to understand, when he is easy, in his native tongue) assures us that this perfect state is never long allowed by Heaven. According to him, and others whom he considers wiser than himself, all the Powers that govern man are stung with envy, when they see him happier than he ought to be. Generally they take good care to have no occasion for this grudge; but when, by any slip of theirs, a mortal has attained such pitch of comfort and prosperity, there is no peace in Olympus, till this robber of delight is crushed. And the more he has flourished and rejoiced, the deeper shall his misery be.

Having only thirty shillings a week, without counting our presents which had been put by, and paying five and sixpence out of that for the rent and rates of our small Paradise, we scarcely can have affronted Heaven by any gorgeous insolence. And without daring to impugn the wisdom of true philosophers, I venture still to hold by that which we find in larger and nobler Writ, that when the Heavenly Power stoops to cut off our brief happiness, it is to make it more abiding, where there is no brevity.

But we did not think of such things then; and who would be sad enough to say that we

were bound to do so? Care would come quite soon enough, we did not care to beckon him. He must have been a doleful wight, and born with black crape round his eyes, who could have looked at my merry Kitty, without catching her bright smile. In the morning when I went to work, I carried it with me like a charm, and whenever I came back at night, it put my memory to the blush.

For we had settled with one accord, that until I had overtaken the large arrears of work which had lapsed behind through my long illness and absence, there should be no time lost by any return for early dinner. And this was better for my wife too, inasmuch as she had only Polly Tompkins to assist her, the eldest daughter of Selsey Bill, a very clean and tidy girl, but of small experience in cookery. I was busy at a long peach-wall, not the red-brick one, but further down, and the trees being large and sadly out of order, patient as well as skilful hands were required urgently. There was a very fine crop yet unthinned, feeble wood to be removed, robber shoots to be docked or tamed, green-fly to be dipped or dusted, and all the other crying needs of neglected trees to be made good. And Kitty used to appear

exactly as the old church clock struck one, with a basket of bread and meat, a pint of ale, and a pipe filled by her own fair hands, which she used to light for me and then trip home, singing merrily among the trees, to see to the business of the afternoon.

Dare anybody tell me that a wife like this would leave her dear husband of her own accord, without a word, without a letter, leave him to wonder, and mourn, and rage, and despair of his own life and hers? Yet this is what all the world believed, and impressed upon me, till my spirit failed.

"Now this is all very fine," exclaimed my Uncle, as he came round the corner of the wall one day, and caught me in the very act of hugging Kitty, as she was preparing to light my pipe. She was looking up and laughing, and pretending to pull my hair, when the deepening of her blush showed that an enemy was nigh; "this is all very fine; but how long will it last? How many quarrels have you had already? I suppose you are making up one of them now."

"Uncle Corny, you are a disgrace," cried Kitty, "a disgrace to the name of humanity. Mayn't I even whisper in my husband's ear,

without being accused of quarrelling? We have never had a single word. Have we, Kit?"

"Then perhaps you will now. Here's a telegram for you. I was going to send Kit home with it. But as you are so uncommonly close together, why, it saves the trouble. Hope some of your enemies are dead, my dear."

"Hush! Don't be so wicked;" she said, as she handed it to me, and I opened it with my pruning-knife, and held it for her to read first. But this required our united efforts, for it was badly written, as so often happens, and some of the words were run together. At last we made it out as follows:—

"Spoke *All Kites* off Scilly May 7th. Captain Fairshort desires love and best wishes to his daughter. Will be away two years perhaps. From Jenkins, s.s. *Hibernia*, Falmouth."

"*All Kites!*" said my Uncle, who had read some of the Georgics, as rendered by Dryden with lofty looseness, but never a line of Horace; "what a name for a ship, if it is a ship! Kitty, my dear, is that the proper word?"

"No, Uncle Corny, it should be *Archytas*. I am not sure who he was, but rather think that he must have been a king of Sparta."

"I know who he was," I said, to show how

much I had learned at Hampton, though I never was much of a hand at Horace, and had only found this out in the dictionary ; “a great man of science, who measured the seas, and the sand, and all that, but could not get to heaven, because nobody would throw a pinch of dust upon his body. And he lay upon the shore, imploring somebody to do it.”

“If he could call out, he could have done it for himself,” replied my Uncle, who was not poetical. “Serve him right, at any rate, for having such a name. But I hope that your father won’t do that, my dear.”

“I think it was very kind of him, when he could not help going, and was far away at sea, to get this kind captain of a ship they met, if we understand it properly, to send me this farewell message from the deep. And it makes my mind ever so much more comfortable, because I shall have another message by and by, I dare say. If he meets one ship he must meet others ; and I shall always have a good idea where he is, and have my mind relieved, when there has been a stormy night. Thank you, Uncle Corny, you have brought me pleasant news. Kit, it is high time for you to go on with your wall.”

In this sort of way, by making the best of everything, and thanking everybody, even if they did not mean to do her any good, she established in a week a sweet dominion, not over us, but within us. My Uncle, though he liked to have his little cut at her—for old men treat young ladies as chicks to be carved—got into the habit of coming up every night of his life to have his pipe at Honeysuckle Cottage. It may seem very ungrateful of me, and I now feel ashamed when I think of it, but after being hard at work all day, and having a bit of cold duck under the wall, I thought that I might have been allowed when I came home to tell my dear wife all my thoughts about her, and how many times I had hammered my thumb-nail through that. But there Uncle Corny sat, carrying on, as if I had cut off my tongue with my pruning-knife!

Kitty used to laugh, and ask me who was jealous now. But I answered, with good reason, that the case was widely different. Miss Sally Chalker never crossed her legs, and sat with a long pipe blowing over a supper-table, neither did she go on talking, as if I were nobody; but rather put me foremost, even when Kitty herself was present, and asked

what my opinion was, before she gave her own almost.

However I made the best of my Uncle's conduct at our cottage; for it was not only my duty, but my important interest to do so. What was to become of us if Uncle Corny (who might be called a huffy man, and stuck to a huff, whenever he contracted it) should take it into his head that I was not what he used to take me for? I knew that he was full of truth and justice, according to his own view of them; but if anything went against his liking, so did truth and justice. So I had to sink my opinions often, even when they agreed with his, for he never liked to have them put into any other language than his own. Kitty was clever enough to see this, and she always praised me afterwards; but it went against one's sense of right, that she might say exactly what I had said, and from her lips it became true wisdom, when it had been simple silliness from mine. But Kitty smiled at him, and laughed at me, and went into his heart more deeply every time she filled his pipe.

Then a new anxiety arose, and Uncle Corny had more than he could do to lay down the law for his own affairs. The wind went into the

east, with a hard blue sky, and not a cloud in it. We had passed the date of the "icy Saints," as they are called in Germany, when a cold wave of air is said to flow over hundreds of leagues of smiling land, and smite it all into one dark frown. If I can remember, without an Almanac, that date is about the seventh of May; but I have never found it quite so punctual here; and according to my observation, the bloom of England hovers in nightly peril, from the middle of April to the very end of May. It is one of the many sad things we meet, but can only fold our hands and watch, that for nearly six weeks of the year, and in early seasons even more, through all our level Southern lands, the fruit-crop trembles on the hazard of a single night's caprice. The bright sun and the lovely day delude the folk who know no better; these are the very things that lead to the starry night, and the quiet cold, and the white sheet over the grass at five a.m., and the black death following. The barren Grower walks between his rows of wounded blossom; there is little harm to be seen at first, some of the petals are as fair as ever, others are just tipped with brown; and perhaps his wife runs up and says—"Oh, you need not be in a fright,

my dear; why, they all look as well as ever."

But he, with deeper wisdom, and the smile of prophetic silence, pulls out his budding-knife, and nips the fairest truss he can find of bloom. Then he lays it in his palm, and haply with keen edge bisects the pips. A keener edge has been there before him; a little black line passes up from the baby stalk to the pistil. The ovary is dead and shrunk, though the anthers still may be tipped with pink. Never shall a fruit grow there, to swell and stripe itself with sun, to flood a plate with sprightly juice, and in its dissolution hear some sweet voice say—"Oh, I never did taste such a lovely pear!"

All these horrors threatened now, in spite of the lateness of the Spring. In a forward Spring, they more than threaten, they come down and smash everything. But being now so late, we began to have some confidence, misplaced as it might be, in the meaning of the sky. And now for the wind to go back to the east (after living there so many months, that it ought to be downright sick of it), and the sun to go down red and clear, like a well-grown turnip-radish, and the stars to come out small and sharp like a lot of glaziers' diamonds, and the mercury in

the thermometer to drop, as if the bulb had been tapped about six o'clock, and scarcely a breath of wind to stir the fans 'of radiation—it was more than enough to make any Grower fetch a groan at the day when himself was grown.

But my Uncle was not of the groaning order, neither did he even hang himself; as one of our very best neighbours did, when he saw his thermometer at twenty-two degrees, one radiant May morning; but his wife, who could enter into his feelings, cut him down with a gooseberry-knife, and enabled him to grow out of it. My Uncle used to read the Gardening papers; which always bloom with fine advice; and one of them had lately been telling largely how, in Continental vineyards, these cold freaks of heaven are met by the sacrificial smoke of earth. To wit, a hundred pyres are raised of the rakings and refuse of the long Vine-alleys, and ready for kindling on the frosty verge. Then a wisp of lighted straw is applied to each, when the sparkling shafts of frost impend, and a genial smoke is wafted through, and Sagittarius has his eyes obscured. I told my Uncle that this was rubbish, at least as regarded our level lands; though it might be

of service upon a hillside. That if there were wind enough to spread the smoke, there must also be enough to prevent the hoar-frost, which alone need be feared at this season. But he told me to stick to what I understood; for these scientific things were beyond me, and my business was to tend the fires.

But in spite of all this brave talk, he was afraid of casting a slur upon his old experience by a new experiment. For the British workman disdains new ideas, and there was not a man upon our place but would say that the Governor was turned cranky, if he got any inkling of this strange scheme.

“I shall have all the stuff put there,” said Uncle Corny, “ready for lighting, when they are gone. Those thick-heads will never suspect that I want to do anything more than burn up the weeds, as we generally do at this time of year. Then as soon as we see the danger coming, you and I will go out and attend to it, my boy. Not that I place any great faith in it, although it seems very sensible, to those who understand the principles, which young fellows cannot be supposed to do. At any rate, I mean to try it. It can do no harm, if it does no good. You need not say another word;

but do just what I tell you. I wasn't born yesterday, as you ought to know by this time."

I knew that well; for it takes many years to root a man into such obstinacy. As a rule, I was much more inclined to give fair trial to anything new than he was, and much more ready to risk money on it. But this would cost nothing, except a little work, and that I could not grudge him. So I told my dear wife not to be uneasy, if I did not come home till after dark some night, for our doings depended of course upon the weather; and the quarter of young pear-trees, which my Uncle meant to smoke, was the furthest part almost of all the premises from Honeysuckle Cottage. Kitty smiled, and said she would come down and see it, and roast a potato or two for our supper, and we would go home together, when the work was done, and make Uncle Corny come with us. Alas, how differently it all turned out!

CHAPTER XIII.

FROST IN MAY.

It was on Wednesday, the fifteenth of May, as fine a day as ever shone from heaven, that my Uncle Corny came up to our cottage, soon after we had finished breakfast. I had done my two hours of early work, according to agreement, and was ready to start for the long day now, and do my best among the trees, until it should be "blind-man's holiday." It had been arranged between my wife and me that I was not to expect her with my noonday meal, but should carry it with me, because she was to be busy at home with a grand turn-out. We had now been home from our bridal trip, for ten days of bliss and perfect peace, and Kitty had declared that it was high time to give our little rooms a thorough cleaning. So far as I could see, they might go another month as they were, and be all the better for it; but in all such matters

the wife is supreme, and the wise man never attempts to gainsay, but only hopes to find some of his property surviving. I had always been most particular about scraping my shoes and then rubbing them on the mat, not as some men do, like a dog's feet scratching, but attending to the welting, and the heels, and toes, until they were as clean as a dinner-plate. This trifle I mention, because some women said that we had a misunderstanding about the mud I brought in.

Now as Kitty had declared that there must be a turn-out, for she was wonderfully fond already of our little home, I had never even asked whether it would not do next week—as many men do, and get a sharp reply—but, feeling quite certain that she must know best, made up my mind accordingly. Only I suggested that she ought to have Mrs. Tompkins in to help her, instead of her daughter, our Polly, who was as nice a girl as could be, but scarcely knew the door-knocker from the boiler-tap. I suspect (perhaps basely) that my darling was afraid that she would have to play second fiddle, if Mrs. Tompkins came; but be that as it may, she would not have her; and simply asked, “How much did I give you back on Monday, dear?” The sum had been ninepence half-

penny, a handsome residue of the fifteen shillings, which under her own scheme of finance, she had drawn from our revenue for the week's consumption. I had said that she ought to take a pound at least, but she stuck to her figure, and would have shown a balance even more considerable, if Uncle Corny had not dropped in with such geniality for supper. "Your frugality is beyond belief," said I.

"Halloa!" cried Uncle Corny, as he came in after breakfast, without even scraping his boots, and carrying a suckering iron, which he poked into a rose—or at least we had determined that it must be a rose—of our new and artistic paper—"signs of it already! I expected it last week. Going to have a turn-out, and knock everything to pieces."

"But we don't carry long iron hoes;" answered Kitty, pointing to the rose which he had suckered off the wall; and he laughed and shook hands, and said, "I had better hold my tongue."

I quite agreed in this, for he always got the worst of it, when he attempted to make light of Kitty; she never said anything rude, but contrived to roll him up in his own rudeness. And perhaps it was the liberty of saying what she pleased, after so many years of snubbing—for

the freedom of their voice must be fresh air to women—which had now set her up in a liveliness of health, such as no one had ever seen her show before. For instance, she had always had a soft clear colour, not to be quenched by her step-mother's slaps, nor even by anxiety about her own Kit; but now, ever since she had married me, there was a richness of bloom on her cheeks, and a delicate gloss you might almost call it, such as may be seen in a Tea rose only, when it has been thoroughly well managed. And now she was wearing her pink chintz wrapper, which showed the perfection of her form, with little sprigs of flowers climbing up it, just as if they vied with one another, for the honour and delight of clinging closer into her. I thought that I had never seen her look so lovely; and she knew what I thought, and her soft eyes sparkled.

“Can’t stop while you look at one another; should have to stop all day, if it came to that;” Uncle Corny was crisp in his style, this morning, because of the frost he expected; “now, Mrs. Kit, don’t expect him, till you see him. He will have to keep the fires up, till ten o’clock, for all I know; and Tabby will have something good for supper at my place. If you

can come too, it will be all the better ; but after all this kick-up of dust, you will be tired. I never can understand why women are always dusting ; they only make more."

"We are not going dusting ; that shows how little you know about it, Uncle Corny," my Kitty replied with proper spirit ; "we are going to have a fine good cleaning, such as you give your wall-trees with the engine. You insist upon keeping your trees clean ; but you don't care how dirty your boards are."

"Boards don't grow," my Uncle replied, as if that shut her up altogether.

"Yes, they grow dirty," she answered in his own short style ; and he only said, "Come along, Kit."

But he turned back, and kissed her ; for he loved her dearly. And both he and I were glad of it, when we talked about it afterwards.

Then, as he started with his swinging walk, for he was proud of his flat back and sound joints, my dear wife came to the door, and threw her round white arms about my neck. She had turned up her sleeves, to show the earnest purpose in her figure, and her scolloped apron, trimmed with pink, came nestling into my waistcoat.

“ We have never been apart so long, my pet, since our wedding-day,” she whispered, and her eyes looked wistful ; “ don’t expect me down there now ; for I don’t think that he wants me much. And I shall have something ready for you, and your new pipe filled, my dear, the one I gave you at Baycliff. I shall be lonely, I dare say ; but I shall have the clock to tell me when you are certain to be home again. And it is high time for us to learn to do without one another.”

People talk of presentiments, as if nothing could happen without them. I only know that I had none ; but it almost seemed as if she had some, being of a quicker mind than I. And I was glad for many a long day that I kissed her with true tenderness, and looking back caught one sweet smile from the corner where the white lilac stood.

All that day, I was hard at work, attending to what I had in hand, with enough of mind to do it well, or at least as well as in me lay. And these things, when they suit the nature, both enlarge and purify it ; so that a man who takes delight in all these little turns of life, although he may be tried and harassed by the pest of plague-some insects, and the shifts of weather,

yet shall do his own heart good, by doing good to what he loves. Neither shall he find himself in the humour to believe half the evil that he hears of his old friends ; or even to be sure, when he goes to his letter-box, that the bill which he finds there a month after he has paid it, may not have been sent in again by pure mistake.

“How you are mooning!” said my Uncle Corny, who often pretended to be rougher than he was ; “that bottom branch should be at least three inches lower. And do you call that leader straight? Why, I call it a ram’s horn. How often must I tell you, that to make sure of your work, you must step back, and see how it looks across the border? And here’s a great batch of scale left to hatch at its leisure. A pretty wife spoiled the best gardener I ever knew. You have been thinking of Kitty, all the blessed day, I see. But put away your nail-bag, and let the net down from the coping. What do you suppose the thermometer is now?”

“Well, perhaps about forty,” I replied, looking round, for the sun was gone down in a rich red sky, and the air was very shrewd, and my fingers getting cold.

“Thirty-six already, and will be thirty very soon ; and twenty-two at four o’clock, as sure

as I'm a sinner. If we only pull through this, we shall be all right. There's a change of weather coming within twenty-four hours. Come and have a glass of ale; and then we'll go and do the bonfires. When we have done, Tabby will give us a hot chop, and then you will be home, before Kitty breaks her heart."

I knew that our bloom, which was now beyond its prime, had escaped very narrowly the night before, and would be in still greater peril to-night; for these frosts always strengthen, until there comes a change. So while he set off with his five-tined fork, I ran to the house for my glass of beer (which I really wanted after that long day), and another box of matches, for he thought that his were damp. And when Mrs. Tapscott handed me the ale, she asked in a tone which made me feel uncomfortable—

"Have 'e got the gearden door locked vast?"

"What garden door do you mean?" I inquired. "There are two gates, and there are three doors, Tabby. And what makes you ask, in that ominous voice?"

"Dun'now what hominous manes," she replied; "but I knows what door I manes, and so ought you. Old lead-coloured door, to the back of your ouze."

“Well, I suppose it must be locked. It always is. None of our men go that way, you know. But what makes you put such a question to-night?”

“Dun’now, no more than the dead,” she answered, “only come into my head, as such things will. Heer’d zummat down town, as zet me a-thinking. You zee her be locked, when you goes home.”

Before I could ask her what she had heard, the sound of my Uncle’s impatient shout came through the still air; and I hurried off to help him, for he had more than he could well do by himself.

It was deep dusk now, and the night was falling fast. Venus, on duty as the evening star, shone with unusual size and sparkle, above the faint gleam which had succeeded the yellow glow after the red sundown. And a little white vapour was rising here and there, where the low ground leaned into the gentle slope; but there was not enough of air on the move to draw the slow mist into lines, or even to breathe it into any shape at all.

“Now look sharp!” exclaimed Uncle Corny, who was not at all concerned with Nature’s doings, except as they concerned his pocket.

"I understand things; and you don't. You will see, if you know north from south, that I have arranged all this in a most scientific manner. Here are fifty piles on the eastern side of all these Bonlewin, and fifty on the north. The wind must be either north or east, when it freezes. We light up, according to the direction of the wind."

He wetted one finger at his lips, and held it up according to some old woman's nostrum for discovering what way the wind blows. And I said—"But supposing there is no wind at all?"

"Very well. It doesn't matter what way it is;" he had made up his mind, and meant to have it out. "You are full of objections, because you know nothing. There is no cure for that, but to do as you are told. You begin at that corner, and let the air go through. I shall take this line, and see who does it best."

"You could never have smoked that Old Arkerate out, in this sort of weather," I said; and he laughed, as he always did, when that triumph was recalled.

"I heard something about him, the other day," he shouted, as he was going down the row of piles; "but I can't stop to tell you now. Remind me at supper."

In spite of all that we both could do, and of all his long preparations, not a whiff of smoke would go near the trees, but all went up as straight as the trees themselves. And I laughed very heartily—the last hearty laugh I was to enjoy for many a day, at the excuses Uncle Corny made for the fume that would only come into his mouth. But he would not confess himself beaten; too genuine a Briton was he for that. He stamped about, and used strong words, and even strove with his broad-flapped hat, to waft the smoke, which was as stubborn as himself, into the track that it should take; till I told him that he was like the wise man of Gotham, who shovelled the sunshine into his barn. Then he laughed, and said—

“Well, it will be all right, by and by. As the frost draws along, this blessed smoke must come with it. You never understand the true principles of things. Just come in and have some supper, and we will have another look at it. You must never expect a thing to work at first. Other people have done it, and I mean to do it. It is nothing but downright obstinacy. Ah there, it begins to go right already! All it wants is a little common sense and patience.”

“I shall go home first,” I said, “and see that

all is right. Kitty has got a bit for me to eat ; and perhaps she will come down with me, in about an hour's time, if she is not too tired. You go, and have your supper, Uncle."

With this, I set off, having long been uneasy, partly perhaps at what Tabby had said, and partly at having been so long from home. But I whistled a tune, and went cheerfully along, for the night was beautiful, and the trees, still piled with blossom, rose against the starry sky, like cones of snow.

Our door was wide open, which surprised me just a little, for my wife was particular about that. Then I went into the passage, and called — "Kitty, Kitty!" but heard no sweet voice say, "Yes, dear!" Neither did any form more sweet than words of kindest greeting come. And my step rang through the passage with that hollow sound which an empty house seems to feel along every wall. With a terrible thumping in my breast, I turned into our little parlour, and struck against a straggling chair. There was no light burning, the window was wide open, the curtains undrawn, the room felt like a well, and the faint light from the sky upon the table showed that no supper-cloth was laid. Shouting for Kitty, in a voice of fear

which startled myself, I groped my way to the mantel-piece where the matches stood. They were in a little ornament which we had brought from Baycliff; my trembling hand upset it, and they fell upon the rug. I picked up half a dozen, I struck them anyhow on the grate, and lit a small wax candle which we had considered rather grand. The room was in good order, there was nothing to tell anything; but I knew that it had not been occupied for hours.

"She is gone," I exclaimed, though with no one to hear me; "my Kitty is gone. She is gone for ever."

I lit the fellow-candle, and left it burning on the table, while I hurried to the kitchen, though I knew it was in vain. The kitchen fireplace was gray with cold ashes; there was not a knife and fork nor a plate set out, and the white deal table had no cooking-cloth upon it. Then I gave up calling "Kitty," as I had been doing all along, till I ran upstairs to our pretty bedroom; and there I called for her once more. When there came no answer, I fell upon the bed, and wondered whether I was mad.

All my wits must have left me in the bitterness of woe. I seemed even to accept it as a thing to be expected, not to want to know the

reason, but to take it like death. Who I was, I knew not for the time, nor tried to think ; but lay as in a blank of all things, only conscious of a misery I could not strive against. I did not even pray to die ; for it seemed to make no difference.

Then up I got, with some sudden change, and the ring of my heel on the floor, as I struck it without measuring distance, now echoed in my brain ; and anger sent anguish to the right-about. "This is the enemy's work," I cried ; "it serves me right for not wringing their necks, for their cursed tricks at Hounslow. So help me God, who has made them and me, I will send them to Him, this time."

My strength was come back, and the vigour of my limbs, and the iron control of every nerve. Until the sense of wrong had touched me, I was but a puling fool. I had felt that all my life was gone, with her who was the spring of it, and that nothing lay before me, but to put up my legs and moan. But praised be the Lord, who has given us that vivid sense of justice which of all His gifts is noblest, here I stood, a man again ; ready to fight the Devil, and my brethren who are full of him.

CHAPTER XIV.

COLD COMFORT.

IN the calm May night, I left my desolate home, to learn the cause and meaning of its desolation. Some men might have doubted whether it was worth their while to trace the dark steps of their own reproach. From what I had seen even now, I knew that my wife had left me of her own accord. There was not the smallest sign of struggle, or disorder, anywhere ; nothing whatever to suggest that any compulsion had been used, or even that any stranger's foot had crossed our humble threshold. Of this I should learn more by daylight ; and I took care not to slur the chance, by even treading the little path that led to the old door in the wall. There was a grass edging to that path, betwixt it and a row of espalier apple trees in full bloom now ; and along that grass I made my way, with a bull's-eye lamp in my hand, as far as the leaden-coloured door, of which

old Tabby had asked a few hours ago. Without stepping in front of that door, I threw the strong light upon it, and perceived at once that it had been opened recently. It was now unbolted and unlocked, and kept shut only by the old thumb-latch. This I lifted, and stepped outside, keeping close to the post, so as not to meddle with any footprints, within or without. Then I cast my light on the dust outside, for the weather had lately been quite dry; and there I saw distinctly the impress of my darling's foot. I could swear to it among ten thousand, with its delicate springy curves; for her feet in their boots had the shapely arch and rise of a small ox-tongue; and ladies did not wear peg-heels then, to make flat feet seem vaulted.

By the side of that comely footprint were the marks of a coarser and commonplace shoe, short and square, and as wide as it was long, probably the sign pedal of a clod-hopping country boy, or lad. Of these there were some half-dozen, as if the boy had stamped about as he entered, and repeated the process, when he returned. "I will examine these carefully, when the sun is up," thought I; "I must see to other matters now."

So I hurried at once, by the shortest track, to the lower corner of the gardens, where my Uncle Corny lived. Tabby Tapscott was gone home, and the house all dark and fast asleep, for I must have lost an hour in my agony on the bed, besides all the other time wasted. At last my thunderous knocks disturbed even the sound sleep of the Grower; and he flung up a window, and looked out, with a nightcap over his frizz of white hair.

“It is no time for anger,” I replied to his hot exclamations; “come, and let me in. I want your advice. I am ruined.”

My Uncle was thoroughly good at heart; when he came down with a light, and saw the ghost he had let in, he was very little better than his visitor. He shook, as if old age were come upon him suddenly, while I tried to tell my tale.

“My Kitty gone, and gone of her own accord!” he cried, as if he, and not I, had lost her. “Man, you must be mad. Are you walking in your sleep?”

“God send that I may be! But when shall I awake?”

The old man’s distress, and his trembling anguish, let loose all the floods of mine; I fell

against the wall, where he hung his hats and saws, and sobbed like a woman who has lost her only child.

"Come, come," he said ; " we shall both be ashamed of this. Your darling is not dead, my boy ; but only lured away by some d——d trick. Don't blame yourself, or her. I will answer for her, sooner than I would for myself in this bad world. You shall have her back again, Kit ; you shall have her back again. There is a God, who never lets us perish, while we stick to Him."

"I have not stuck to Him. I have stuck to her." The truth of my words came upon me like a flash. It was the first time I had even thought of this.

"Never mind. He knows ; and He meant it so," my Uncle replied with some theology of his own ; " no man will be punished for doing what the Bible orders. You'll see, my dear boy, it will all come right. You will live to laugh at this infernal trick. And I hope to the Lord, that I shall be alive to grin with you. Cheer up, old fellow. What would your Kitty think, to see you knock under to a bit of rigma-role ? You must keep up your spirits for poor Kitty's sake."

To see an old man show more pluck than a young one, and to take in a little of his fine faith, set me on my pins again, more than any one would believe ; and I followed him into his kitchen, where the remnants of the fire were not quite dead.

“Now blow it up, Kit,” he said ; “and put a bit of wood in. Tabby always leaves it in this cupboard. Ah, that was a fine tree, that old Jargonel ! It lived on its bark, I believe, for about a score of years, and you helped to split it up, when you were courting Kitty. You shall court her again, my boy, and have another honeymoon, as they’ve cut yours short in this confounded way. Now, make a good fire, while I put my breeches on. You look like a ghost, that has never had a bit to eat. And I don’t suppose you have touched a morsel to speak of, since breakfast. ‘Never say die’ is my motto, Kit. We’ll be at the Police-office, by three o’clock. We can do nothing till then, you know.”

Even as he spoke, his ancient cuckoo sang out one o’clock ; and I obeyed his orders, and even found a little comfort in the thought, that Kitty would have smiled to see my clumsy efforts ; for she was very knowing about making

fires up. When I had contrived to eat a bit of something, which my Uncle warmed up for me, though I never knew what it was, he gave me a glass of old ale, and took a drop himself; and we talked of our calamity, until it was time to go. He asked me whether anything within the last few days could be called to mind that bore at all upon this sudden mystery. Whether any jarring words, however little thought of, had passed between my wife and me, as is sometimes the case, even when a couple are all in all to one another. But I could remember none, nor any approach to such a thing; and I had never seen a frown upon my darling's forehead.

Then he told me what he had heard about his former tenant, Harker, the man whom he ejected by a fumigating process, much more successful than the ejection of the frost. It was nothing more than this, and even this perhaps a piece of idle village gossip. Old Arkerate had taken much amiss his tardy expulsion, for he meant to live rent-free through winter, and had been heard to say that he would be—something anticipatory perhaps of his final doom—if that blessed young couple should be in his house very long. For he knew a trick worth two of that. And if he

had been smoked out, hang them, they should be burned out.

I agreed with my Uncle that such stuff as this was not worth repeating, especially as nothing of the kind had come to pass; and yet again it appeared suspicious that the door through which my dear wife had vanished should be the very one which old Harker had used for his special entrance and exit; while he had even been jealous of any attempt on the part of the owners to use it. But my Uncle and myself were uncommonly poor hands at anything akin to spying. Our rule had always been to accept small fibs (such as every man receives by the dozen daily) without passing them through a fine sieve; which if any man does, he will have little time for any other employment.

“Take this big stick, Kit; I brought it for the purpose,” said my Uncle, when I had knocked a dozen times in vain, at the door of Sergeant Biggs, our head policeman; “it is the toughest bit of stuff I have ever handled. It will go through the panel of the door, before it breaks. Don’t be afraid, my boy; take both hands; but let me get out of the way, before you swing it. Ah, that ought to bring him

out. But we must make allowance for the strength of his sleep, because he has such practice at it, all day long."

Our police force at that time consisted of two men, Sergeant Biggs the chief officer, and Constable Turnover; very good men both, and highly popular. They were not paid by any means according to their merits; and we always got up a Christmas-box for them, which put them on their honour not to make a fuss for nothing. It is wise of every place to keep its policemen in good humour; otherwise it gets a shocking name, without deserving it.

"Coming, Master, coming. Don't you be in such a hurry," we heard a very reasonable voice reply at last. "Got one leg into these here breeches, and can't get in the other, 'cos they wasn't made for me. Ah, there goes that blessed stair into my bad leg again! They promised to mend it, last Lady Day twelve-month; but mend it they won't, till I've got a running sore. Now, gents both, what can I do for you? Always at the post of duty. That's the motto of the Force. Why, bless me, if it isn't Mr. Orchardson! Any delinquents in your garden, sir?"

"Ever so much worse than that," replied my

Uncle; "Biggs, are you wide awake? A dreadful thing has happened. Where is Turnover? We shall want you both at once."

"On duty, sir; patrolling—unless he have turned in. But he's very good for that, when I looks after him. Which I do pretty sharp, as he knows to his credit. A very active constable is Turnover. But come inside, Mr. Orchardson. Don't stand out in the cold, sir."

There was a streak of dawn among the trees towards Hampton, and the white frost-fog had rolled up from the river; and I saw that a dark cloud was gathering in the south. The change that my Uncle had foretold was coming, even sooner than he had expected it.

We went inside; and Sergeant Biggs, who had a light, pulled on a coat, and sat down in state before a railed desk, on which a square book was lying. Then he turned the brass cover off the ink, and squared his elbows.

"Now, sir, the particulars, if you please. We must make entry, afore we does nothing. You were quite right in coming to head-quarters, Mr. Orchardson. Let me see; May the fourteenth, isn't it?"

"No, Biggs, no. It is morning now; and yesterday was the fifteenth of May."

"Quite right, sir. Here it is upon the *Standard*. May 16th, 1861, 3.30 a.m. by office clock. Information received from Cornelius Orchardson, of the Fruit-Gardens, Sunbury. Everything ready, sir. Please to go ahead."

"Kit, you tell him. You know most about it. Scratch out 'Cornelius;' and put 'Christopher,' Biggs."

Sergeant Biggs did not like to disfigure his book. However he was a most obliging man. "Stay, sir, stay," he exclaimed: "I can do it better and neater than that is. 'Cornelius Orchardson, of the Fruit-Gardens, Sunbury, and his nephew Christopher Orchardson.' That meets the point exactly. Now then, gentlemen, fire away. And I will reduce it into proper form."

Chafing at all this rigmarole, which was sending another good hour to waste, I poured out my tale in a very few words, and had the satisfaction of seeing at last an expression of amazement gathering and deepening on the large fat countenance of Sergeant Biggs.

"Why, this beats everything as was ever done in Sunbury, since Squire Coldpepper's daughter ran away! And in the same family

too, as you might say ! How long ago was that ? Why, let me see." He was going to refer to some books, and took off his horn spectacles first to consider where they were.

"Come along, Biggs. No time for that," cried my Uncle impatiently ; "we want you to come and examine the place at once. It was useless for us to go up, till daylight. There are footsteps for you to examine, and the doors."

"Now this here will be all over London, afore the clock strikes twelve to-day. Ah, you may stare, gentlemen ; and we don't tell how we do it. But such is our organization, and things are brought to such perfection now——"

"Come along, Biggs. Why, it's pouring with rain ! I knew the white frosts were sure to bring it. But I did not expect it till the afternoon. And it sounds like hail—shocking thing for all my blossom."

"I'll be with you, Mr. Orchardson, in about ten minutes. But I must put my toggery to rights first, you see. Sergeant Biggs does not think much of himself ; but Sunbury does, and it would stare to see him go on duty without any waistcoat or stock, or even a pair of braces on. By the by, gents, have you been to Tompkins' house ?"

This was about the first sensible thing he had said: and I answered that we had not been there yet; but would go there at once, as it was not far out of our course, and we would rejoin him at the cottage. I had thought more than once in the long hours of that night of going to see the girl Polly, but was loth to knock up a hard-working household for nothing, and felt sure that Polly could throw no light upon the matter: as she always left our cottage about five in the afternoon.

And so it proved when we saw her now. For she could only stare, and exclaim "Oh Lor'!" having most of her wits, which were not very active, absorbed in hard work, and the necessity of living. And the more I examined her, the more nervous she became, fancying that she was undergoing trial, and perhaps likely to be hanged for the loss of her young mistress.

"I never see nawbody take her away: nor nawbody come anigh the house, all the time as I were in it. Mother knows I didn't." This she said over and over again.

"Nobody says that you did, Polly," I answered as gently as possible; "but did you see anything to make you think, that your

mistress meant to go away, when you were gone?"

"I don't now what she was a thinking of. She never told me nort about it. No, I never see nawbody take her away. It isn't fair, nor true, to say so."

"But, my good child, nobody supposes that you did. Nobody is blaming you in the least. Nobody thinks that you saw her go away. But can't you tell us whether you saw anything to show that she was likely to go away?"

"Yes, I saw a big black crow come flying right over the roof about one o'clock; and then I knowed as some one was agoing, 'live or dead. But I never told her, feared to frighten her. Lord in heaven knows I didn't."

"And did you see anything else go by? A cat, or a dog, or a man, or a woman, or anything else that did not usually come? Or did you hear any steps, anywhere near the house, or see anything more than usual?"

Polly shook her head, as if I was putting a crushing weight of thought on the top of it. And then she began to cry again, and her mother came up to protect her. She had cried when she heard that her mistress was gone; and she must not be allowed to cry

again, or no one could tell what would come of it.

“Sweetie, tell the whole truth now. Got no need to be frightened. If perlice does come, they can’t do nothing at all to you, my dear. Seventeen children have I had, and none ever put thumb on the Bible.”

Mrs. Tompkins did not mean that her family failed to search the Scriptures, but that they had never been involved in criminal proceedings; nay, not even as witnesses.

“Well then I think as I did see summat,” replied Polly under this encouragement. I would not have pressed her as I did, unless I had felt pretty sure that she was keeping something back. “It worn’t nothin’ to speak of much, nor yet to think upon, at the time.”

“Well, out with it, deary, whatever it was. All you have to do, is to speak the truth, and leave them as can put two and two together, to make out the meaning of it.”

Thus adjured, Polly, after one more glance to be sure that no policeman was coming, told her tale. It was not very much, but it might mean something.

“’Twur about four o’clock, I believe, and all the things was put back again after mucksing

out the rooms, when Missus said to me, 'You run, Polly, and pick a little bit of chive down the walk there. I don't want much,' she says, 'but what there is must be good, and just enough to cover a penny-piece, after I've chopped it up and put it together. I wants to have everything ready,' she says, 'just to make a homily, when my husband comes home. I have got plenty of parsley in that cup,' she says, 'but he always likes a little bit of chive, to give it seasoning. And be sure you pick it clean,' she says, 'and it mustn't be yellow at the tip, or dirty, because if the grit gets in,' she says, 'it's ever so much worse than having none at all.' So I says, 'All right, Ma'am, I knows where it is; and you shall have the best bit out of all the row.' 'You're a good girl,' she says, 'don't be longer than you can help, and you shall have a cup of tea, Polly, before you go home, because you've worked very well to-day; nobody could 'a doed it better,' says she. Well, I took a little punnet as was hanging in the kitchen, not to make it hot in my hands, you see, and I went along the grass by the gooseberry bushes,—you knows the place I mean, mother; and there was the chives, all as green as little leeks. As I was a-stooping over them,

with my back up to the sky, all of a sudden I heer'd a sort of creak like, as made me stand up and look to know where it come from. And then I seed the old door, as used to be bolted always, opening just a little way, in towards me, though I was a good bit off; and then the brim of a hat come through, and I sings out, 'Who's there, please?' There wasn't no nose or eyes a-coming through the door yet; nor yet any legs, so far as I could see; but only that there brim, like the brim of a soft hat; and I couldn't say for certain whether it were brown or black. 'Nothing here to steal,' I says, for I thought it wor some tramp; and then the door shut softly, and I was half a mind to go and see, whether there was any one out in the lane. But it all began to look so lonely like, and I was ordered not to stop, and so I thought the best thing was to go back, and tell the Missus. But something came that drove it out of my mind altogether. For when I got back to the house she says, 'Don't you lose a minute, Polly, that's a good girl. Run as far as Widow Cut-thumb's, and fetch half a dozen eggs. I thought I had four, and I have only got three,' she says, 'and I can't make a homily for two people of three eggs. And my husband won't eat a bit, unless I has some,' she says.

“So I was off quick stick to Widow Cutthumb’s; and there, outside the door, I seen that Bat Osborne, the most owdacious boy in all Sunbury. ‘Halloa!’ says he, ‘Poll, you do look stunnin’. Got a baker’s roll a-risin’, by the way you be a-pantin’! Give us a lock of your hair, again’ the time when we gets old,’ he says. And afore I could give him a box on his ear, out he spreads his fingers, some way he must have learned—for I never could ‘a doed it myself, no, that I couldn’t—and away goes all my back-hair down over all my shoulders, just the same as if it was Sunday going on for three years back. That vexed I were, I can assure you, Mr. Kit—well, mother knows best how I put it up that very same morning for the cleaning, and our Annie to hold the black pins for me—but get at him I couldn’t, to give him one for himself. He were half across the street, afore I could see out; and he hollered out some imperence as made all the others grinny. But I’ll have my change, afore next Sunday week, I will.

“When I got back, Mr. Kit, you may suppose, all about the door and the hat-brim was gone clean out of my mind, as if it never was there; and I come away home, without a word

about it, and never thought of it nother, till I lay awake in bed and heered our own door creak, when father went to spy the weather. But oh, if I had only thought about it, Mr. Kit, perhaps Missus mightn't never 'a been took off!"

CHAPTER XV.

NONE.

AT this beginning of my great trouble, I used to be worried, more than common sense would warrant, by the easy way in which other people took my distress, even while I was among them. If anything occurred to make them laugh, they laughed with all their hearts at things, in which I could perceive no joke at all. I dare say they were right, and I was wrong; but I felt that I should not have laughed at all, if the tables had been turned upon them, as I wished they had been. That is to say, if they had been in bitter grief, and I had been standing outside to help them. For the policemen I could make all allowance, because they must get seasoned by their profession, even as the lawyers do; but it did seem a little bit unnatural at first, that some men, to whom I would gladly have lent my last shilling but one, if they had

wanted it, should be ready to put their hands into their pockets, not to feel if there was anything there for my good, but to enable them to enjoy a broad grin at leisure, if the least bit of laughable nature turned up. But one thing I will say for the women, there was scarcely so much as a smile among them; they could understand what I had lost, and they knew (perhaps from self-examination) that a good wife is not to be got every day.

The heavy cloud had been pouring down rain in volumes and hail in lines, when with Selsey Bill, and Mrs. Bill, and Polly lagging after us under a broken umbrella, my Uncle and myself came to Honeysuckle Cottage, and found Sergeant Biggs and Constable Turnover, with their oilskin capes running like a tiled roof, and their faces full of discipline.

“Wouldn’t go inside, gents, till you came; no warrant being out, and no instructions received. Always gets into trouble, when we acts on our own hook.”

We led them inside, for there was broad daylight now, and the cloud began to lift, and the rain came down in single drops, instead of one great sheet. As they stamped about, and shook themselves in our little passage, scattering

grimy wetness like a trundled mop, I wondered, with a bitter pang, what Kitty would have thought after all her neat work, if she could only have seen this.

“Turnover, you come after me. We makes this inspection together, mind. And what I sees, you sees, and corroborates. Though it ain’t a case of murder, so far as we know yet, we must keep our eyes open, the same as if it was. Everything comes to us, and nothing comes amiss to them that does their duty.”

This sentiment was much admired by Constable Turnover; and my Uncle whispered, “Let them do exactly as they like, Kit. They are a pair of fools; but we need not tell them so. We shall have them on our side, at any rate. And if they don’t do any good, they can do no harm. Leave them entirely to their own devices.”

This quite agreed with my own view of the matter. When a crime has been committed, we call in the police, as in dangerous illness we invoke a doctor, for the satisfaction of our own minds, rather than from any hope of being helped. And in the former case, we have this advantage—the thing becomes widely spread, and distant eyes are turned on it.

“All in order, gents; not a lock been forced, nor a door broke open, so far as we can discover.” Sergeant Biggs was beating his hands together, from the force of habit, as he came to us in the kitchen, where we were sitting drowsily. “Two windows open, and some rain come in; but no sign of entrance by them. The young lady have gone of her own accord, and left no sign for any one. Time of disappearance not exactly known, you say, but somewhere between five and ten o’clock supposed. Please give particulars of dress, height, and complexion. We know the young lady well enough, of course, but we like to have those things from relatives. And the dress is beyond us; ladies always are so changing. Mr. Kit says her gray cloak is gone, and brown bonnet. White chip hat hanging on the peg. Looks as if she meant to go a goodish way. But not much preparation for travelling. There was a little black bag, sir, you said you could not find. Very sorry to trouble you, sir, when you are so down-hearted. But I must ask you just to look into them drawers in the lady’s bedroom. And specially to see if any cash is missing. Excuse me, sir, I meant no rudeness.”

For I had leaped up, and was ready to strike him, at the suggestion that my darling could have robbed me.

“He is doing his duty, Kit; don’t be a fool;” cried my Uncle, as Biggs threw his arm up in defence.

“Must give up this case, sir,” said the Sergeant, without anger; “unless you allows us to conduct it our own way. We are bound to know all that can throw a light upon it. And nine times out of ten, when a woman—beg pardon—a lady runs away from her husband on the sudden, she collars all the cash, and all the trinkets she can find. Don’t mean to insinuate for a moment that this young lady done anything of the kind. But for all that, I am bound to put the question; and Mr. Cornelius can see it, if you can’t, sir.”

“Very well; I will go and see,” I answered, having sense enough to know that he was right; “and you can both come and see for yourselves, if you like. Perhaps you won’t believe it, unless you do. At any rate, you come, Uncle Corny.”

I ran up in haste to our little bedroom, as pretty a room as one could wish to see, for its cheerfulness, airiness, and fair view, between

the clustering climbers, of the broad winding river and the hills beyond, all to be seen either over or amid a great waving depth of white and pink, where the snow of the pears put the apples to the blush. Very plainly furnished as it was, our little room looked sweet, even in its desolation, and as lively and delightful as the bride who had adorned it. My Aunt Parslow had given us a pretty chest of drawers, of real bird's-eye maple-wood, which she had bought at a sale somewhere; and we kept all our money, that was not at the Bank, in one of the top drawers, which had a tolerable lock. This was the proper place for Kitty's purse and mine; although I never had one, so to speak—at least it was always empty. Whenever I had any money, fit to spend, it was generally always in my waistcoat-pocket; and it never stopped there long, if I came across anybody who deserved it. But I never went out with too much at a time; for it is not safe to have nothing left at home. The key was not in the drawer, of course; but I knew where Kitty kept it, and there it was, as usual.

I could have wept now, if I might have made sure of nobody coming after me, when I found all the balance of this week's allowance for

housekeeping uses in a twist of silver paper—such as used to be common, but is seldom seen now; and my darling had not made much boot upon the store, ever since last Saturday. For our butcher, who wanted her to run up an account (being in love with her, as everybody was, although he had a wife and seven little butchers rising), had made believe that he could not stop to weigh the last half-leg of mutton he sent up. Kitty had told me of this, and lamented, while unwilling to appear distrustful of him. For an honest tradesman dislikes that, though he often has to brace up his mind to it.

I put this residue of our fifteen shillings into one corner, as a sacred thing; and then I went to the brown metal box at the back of the drawer, where we kept our main stock, with a dozen of my wife's new handkerchiefs piled over it, to delude all burglars. I had bought her a dozen, at less than cost price, as the haberdasher vowed, at Baycliff; and we had been reluctant to be so hard upon him; but he said that he was selling off, and we must have the benefit. And I lifted them now with a miserable pang; for my love had kissed me, for this cheap but pretty present, and she had marked them all with her own sweet hair.

I have often been astonished in my life, as everybody must be, almost before his hair begins to grow ; but mine (which was now in abundant short curls) would have pushed off my hat, if I had worn one, when the money-box came to my eyes, half open, and as clean as a spade on a Saturday night. Every bank-note was gone, and every sovereign too, and even the four half-sovereigns, which we had meant to spend first, when we could not help it !

I have never loved money with much of my heart, though we are bound to do as our neighbours do ; and perhaps it had been a little pleasure to me, to have more than I ever could have dreamed of having, through the great generosity of Aunt Parslow, and the timely assistance of Captain Fairthorn. But now my whole heart went down in a lump, and I scarcely had any power of breath, as I fell once more upon my widowed bed, and had no strength to wrestle with the woe that lay upon me. That my own wife, my own true wife, the heart of my heart, and the life of my life, should have run away from me, of her own accord, without a word, without one good-bye, and carried off all our money !

“ Come, Kit, how much longer do you mean

to be?" my Uncle's voice came up the stairs. "Let him alone, Biggs. Perhaps he is crying. Those young fellows never understand the world. Some little thing comes round a corner on them, and they give way, for want of seasoning. He was wonderfully bound up in his Kitty. And however it may look against her now, I will stake my life that she deserved it. You Peelers see all the worst of the world, and it makes you look black at everything. I would lay every penny I possess, which is very little in these free-trade times, that he finds every farthing of his money right. Though I have often told him what a fool he was to keep so much in his own house."

"He seems an uncommon time a-counting of it." Sergeant Biggs spoke sceptically, and retired to the kitchen; for it did not matter very much to him.

Getting no reply from me, my Uncle came up slowly; for a night out of bed tells upon the stiff joints, when a man is getting on in years. Then he marched up bravely, and laid one hand upon my shoulder.

"What are you about, Kit? Breaking down, old fellow! You must not do that, with these chaps in the house, or the Lord knows what a

lot of lies will get about. Money all right, of course. No doubt of that, my boy."

I could make no answer, but pointed to the drawer, which was still pulled out to its full extent. With a little smile, which expressed as well as words—"What a fool you must be, to keep your money there!" he looked in, and saw the empty cash-box, and turned as white as his own pear-blossom. Then he took the brown box in his thick right hand, and turned it upside down, as if he could not trust his eyes.

"How much was there in it? But perhaps you did not know? Oh, Kit, Kit, is it come to this at last?"

He spoke as if I ought to have been robbed by my own wife, a long time ago, and was bound by the duty of a husband to expect it. But my spirit rose, and I jumped up, and faced him.

"Every farthing of it was her own," I said; "and she had a perfect right to take it. It is part of the hundred pounds Aunt Parslow gave her, on our—on her wedding-day. There was forty-five pounds in that box; and the other fifty-five was invested according to your advice. I would send her that also, if I knew her address. It was all her own money; you may

ask Aunt Parslow. I have no right to a farthing of it."

"Kit, you are a very fine fellow after all, though you do take things so lumpily. But answer me one little question. Why did your Aunt give her that hundred pounds?"

"Because she loved her, as everybody does—or did. Because she was so kind, and good, and loving."

"No, my boy, not at all for that reason. But because she married you, Aunt Parslow's nephew. The money was yours, in all honesty, not hers. Or at any rate it belonged to you together. She had no more right to take that money without your consent, than I have to walk into Baker Rasp's shop, and walk out of it with the contents of his till. You must look at things squarely, and make your mind up. Expel her from your heart. She is a light-of-love, and a robber. Oh, Kit, Kit, that I should have brought you into this! And I did think that I knew so much about women."

My Uncle shed a tear, not on his own account, or mine, and perhaps not even for the sake of women; but because he had loved Kitty as his own daughter, and he could no more expel her from his heart, than I from mine; at least with-

out taking a long time about it. I was moved with his grief, for he was hard to grieve; and my wrath at his injustice was disarmed. I put back the empty box, and locked the drawer; for I knew that it was useless to argue with him.

“This is the second great grief of my life,” he said in a low voice, as if talking to himself; “over and above those losses which are inflicted on us by the Lord, as time goes on. And the other was through a woman too. I will tell you of it, when we have more time; for it may help you in your own grief, Kit. But now we must quiet those fellows downstairs. I wish we had never called them in. I would rather lose every penny I possess, and start in the world again, as a market-porter, than let this miserable story get abroad. We must take your view of the case before the public, and tell them that there is no money gone, except her own. The Lord knows that I am not a liar, and He will forgive me for stretching a bit this time. Or perhaps you had better do it; because you believe it, you know, and so there won’t be any lie at all. You go down first; and I will come behind you grumbling, which no one can say is an ungrateful thing now.”

This seemed the proper course, although in my misery I should never have thought of it, until I wished that I had done so. The question as to the right to that money lay between myself and Kitty; and as she had doubtless considered it hers, to brand her at large as a robber, without allowing her chance of explanation, would be most unfair, and would only add another pain to a story too painful already. So I went down and told Sergeant Biggs that my wife had taken a few clothes in her hand-bag, and a part of some money she had lately received as a wedding-present, but had left the balance of her cash for housekeeping, as well as most of her trinkets, in the bedroom drawer.

He was much disappointed at this, and shook his head, to disguise the blow received by his sagacity.

“Beats me for the present, at any rate,” he said; “but time will throw more light upon it, before we are many years older. You hold on, sir, and not go about too much. Half the mischief comes of that. A party comes to us, and he says—‘Look here, I leave the whole of it to your care, Sergeant. You understand these things, and I don’t. Anything as you do I will back up—magistrates, witnesses, lawyers,

dogstealers—whatever you find needful, up to a five-pound note, or more.’ And after that, what do we feel? Why, ready to go through with it, on our best mettle, you might say, and come down with cash out of own breeches’ pocket, for love of nothing else but duty. And then we gets crossed, like two dogs a-coursing, by the other party’s track, with his nose up in the air, the very same as if he never come anigh us. So I says to Turnover, ‘Now one thing or the other; either they must let us do it all, or nothing. And if we do it all, in a hunt-the-slipper thing like this, we must know all the ins and outs, first from the beginning. Then,’ says I, ‘we can give our minds to it, Turnover.’ And he answers—‘Yes, Sergeant, but do they mean to tell us everything?’ And now that’s the question before you, sir.”

“We will think about that, and let you know by and by,” said my Uncle, who had listened to this long oration; “not that you ever find out anything, Biggs. Still it is a comfort to believe that you are trying. And now come and do what you ought to have done long ago—make a careful examination of the footprints by the door. It has been raining pretty sharp; but it all came from the south, and the important

marks are on the north side in the lane, according to what my nephew saw last night, and the shower won't have touched them, with the door shut to. Bring some paper and a pencil, and your old joint-rule, Kit. Not that we shall ever make out much."

He was right enough in that last prediction. For although I had fastened the door—in strict keeping with the moral of the proverb—and no rain had pelted the ground outside it, yet a greater effacer than rain had been there. For the spot being on a sharp slope, and below the crown of the road, or the lane I should say, a strong rush of water had taken track there, and washed away all the dust, and then the heavier substance, leaving rough pebbles with sharp edges sticking up, as clean and unconscious as before they saw the world.

"Nothing to be made of that," said Biggs; "nor of any footmarks anywhere else, after all the rain as have fallen. Only thing to do now is to inquire of the neighbours, and folk as were about last night."

CHAPTER XVI.

ON TWO CHAIRS.

FOR as much as three weeks I had been full of pride, in taking my Kitty about everywhere—even by the seaside, where I knew very little, but luckily she knew less, in spite of her scientific origin—and asking her to look about and see things with her own eyes; and if she could not make them out, to call me in to help her. This had been rash on my part; for a man may be gaping about, for his lifetime, and die after all with his mouth wide open; and not a word come from it, to help the people left behind, but only to unsettle them, and put them in a flutter; as gnats skip into another dance, at every new breath across them. But Kitty had really put some questions far outside my knowledge (as a child may, who hangs on his grandfather's thumb), and I had promised to look up those points and deliver an opinion,

when I had one. All this came into my mind, like a chill, when I had to trace her dear steps, away from me, away from me.

Let seventy times seven wise men say that no man with a grain of wisdom could have a spark of faith in women, because they never know their own mind—little as there is of it to know—I still abode in my own faith, and let them quote old saws against the sturdy hold-fast of true love. I felt as sure of my Kitty's heart, as I did of my own, and more so; for she never would have borne to hear a hundredth part of the things against me, which I had to listen to against her. And the cowards, who vent their own craven souls in slander of those who cannot face them, had a fine time of it now, and rejoiced in the misery they were too small to feel. Such things might sour a weakling, who depends upon what other people think; but I found enough of manhood coming up in me, as time went on, to make me stick to my own trust, and let outer opinions touch my home, no more than the shower that runs down the glass.

At first, however, it was dreadful work. Everybody seemed to be against me, not with any unkindness, but by way of worldly wisdom.

“Don’t you dwell too much upon it.” “A runaway wife isn’t worth running after.” “Never you mind; but get another; try the people you know, with their friends in the place.” These were the counsels I received, with a nod of my head, and no reply.

But I could not see things as others saw them. I spent the first day of my lonely life, in wandering through the crooked lanes, and working out every track and turn which my darling could have taken, in the dark mystery of her flight from me. Very often I thought that she must come back; and there was scarcely a hill that I did not run up, persuading myself that when the top was gained, there I should descry her in the distance beyond, weary, and dragging her feet along, but eager at sight of me to make a rush and fall into my longing arms. How many a corner I turned, believing that it must be the last between her and me; and how many a footpath stile I sat on, hiding my eyes that she might catch me unawares, as at blind-man’s buff, and throw her warm arms round my neck, and kiss me into shame of my mistrust, and tell me that she never could have doubted me, whatever I had done, or whatever people said!

And then, when it grew too dark to see even my own love in the shadow of the lanes, and the last note of the wedded thrush (who sings to the sparkle of the stars in May) was hushed by a call from his nest, and followed by the first clear trill of the nightingale

“Who tells the deeper tale of night
With passion too intense for light,”

—weary, and with little heart for loneliness and doubt and woe, yet I could not be quite sure that when I opened our own door, some one might not run out hotly, and give me no time to speak, but hold me lip to lip, and breast to breast, with scarcely room for a tear between us.

It is the emptiness that follows such full hope that does the harm to the powers of endurance. When no one came to meet me, and the cold rooms showed gray lines of shade, with no dear life to cross them, I used to fall away, and feel my heart go down, like the water of a sink, when the plug is taken out of it. There was nothing more for it to do. My wretched life was not worth the fuss of pumping and of labouring; better to give in at once, and have no more pain to drain it.

“You are killing yourself up here, my boy ;

this will never do," said Uncle Corny. "Bother the women; what a pest they are! Try to be like that ancient fellow—I can never remember his name, but they call him the father of history. You told me about him, when you went to the Grammar-school at Hampton. And it was so wise that I paid for another half-year for you to read him. You know better than I do; but I think there had been a lot of carrying off of pretty girls between two countries, and they were going to fight about them. But he says that they had no call to do it; for men of discretion would let them go, and make no fuss about them. Because it was manifest that the women would never have been carried off, unless they themselves had wished it. I don't suppose you could do it now; but if you can, bring down the book, and read it to me this evening. It would do you a deal more good than to hold your tongue, and eat your heart out."

"I hate to hear of that rubbish," I replied; "they were a lot of good-for-nothings. To talk of my Kitty in that sort of way would drive me mad, Uncle Corny. If you have nothing better to say than that, you had better go home to Tabby."

“Well, perhaps they will come and carry Tabby off. I believe she would go for a new bonnet; and I don’t know what I should do if she did. But shut up this place, Kit, and come back to the old quarters. You want company, my boy; and I’d rather let old Harker in again, than have you here killing yourself like that, and sleeping in the kitchen on two chairs; if you ever get any sleep at all.”

“I will never leave this house,” I said; “and I won’t even be smoked out of it. When Kitty comes back, she will come here first; and there is no telling how soon she may want me. You only bother me with all this stuff.”

“Well, I will not be hard upon you, Kit; because the Lord has done that quite enough. But you have not got a bit of religion in you, after all the teaching I have given you.”

This was very fine from Uncle Corny, who never even went to church, except to keep other people out of his pew. And he rubbed his nose as he said it; as he always did, when he had gone too far.

“There is a very good man wants to see you,” he went on a little nervously, for I knew that he had been leading up to something; “and a man to whom you are bound to listen,

because he was the one who married you, and therefore understands all the subject, matrimony, women, and the doctrines of the Church. The Reverend Peter Golightly wishes to have a little talk with you."

"And I wish to have none with him. He is a very good and kind-hearted man. But I could not bear to hear his voice, after—after what he did for me, and Kitty."

"I was afraid there would be that objection," my Uncle answered kindly; "but you will get over that by and by, my boy. And it would be rude not to see him, for he takes the greatest interest in your case. He has been disappointed himself, I believe; though of course he did not tell me so. He is too much a man for that sort of thing. I shall go and hear him preach some day, unless our Vicar comes back again. They tell me that he does a lot of good, and he preached against robbing orchards once, although he has only got one apple tree, and it is eaten up with American blight. There's another fellow wants to see you too—not much of the parson about him. He can tell you things you ought to know; and being about as he always is, I wonder you have not been to see him. Not that I care for Sam Henderson; but

he is not so bad as he used to be. He is going to be married next month; and I'll be bound he won't let his wife——”

“Run away from him—you were going to say. Perhaps he will not be able to help himself. Well, I will see him, if he likes to come. I shall be back, by nine o'clock. It is very kind of him to wish it. But send up a bottle of whisky, Uncle. I have no drink of any sort in the house; and Sam is nothing without his glass, although he never takes very much. I must give him something, if he comes.”

“And take a drop yourself, my boy, if only for a little change. I don't hold with cold water, when a fellow is so down; though it is better than the opposite extreme. I suppose, by the by, that your Kitty had not taken——”

“Uncle Corny!” I cried, in a voice that made him jump; “what next will you imagine? She never touched anything, not even beer; though I often tried to make her take a glass. She had seen too much of that, where she was.”

“All right, Kit. But you are getting very cross; which is not the proper lesson of affliction, as the Reverend Peter might express it. Well, I'll send little Bill up, with the bottle and a corkscrew. I don't suppose you know where

to find anything now. That's the worst of married life even for three weeks. But I have got a plan I mean to tell you of to-morrow."

When I came back, a little after dark, having finished that hopeless wandering which I went through every evening now, there was Sam Henderson, sitting on an empty flower-pot outside my door, with a cigar in his mouth. He might have gone inside, for I left the front door open all day long and all night too, unless the weather prevented it, for I had nothing to be robbed of now; at least, nothing that I cared about, except Kitty's clothes, which I had locked out of sight. And it seemed to be delicate and kind of Sam, to sit here in discomfort, instead of walking in. And he showed another piece of good taste and good will, which could hardly be expected from so blunt and rough a man—he said not a word about his own bright prospects, until I inquired about them.

But he shook my hand in a very friendly way, and left me to begin upon the matter which had brought me to my present state. And for some time I also avoided that.

"I will tell you, old chap," he said at last, in reply to my anxious question, "exactly what I

think, though it is not good for much, being altogether out of my own line. I think you have been awfully wronged, as abominably wronged as any fellow ever was, on the face of this earth—which is saying a good bit, mind you. Knowing what a lot of infernal rogues there are to be found at every corner, and much more often than decent fellows, I am never brought up standing by any black job; though the ins and outs of it may floor me. The Professor is a soft man, isn't he? He has shown it in many ways, although he is so clever. You would call him a soft man, wouldn't you?"

"Well," I said, wondering how this could bear upon it, "I suppose he is rather of the credulous order, as most good men are, who measure others by themselves. But he had left England long before. So that can have little to do with it."

"Right you are, as concerns himself. But I am a believer in breed, my friend. And the longer I live, the more true I find it come. A credulous father, if you prefer the word, is likely to be blest with a credulous child, and your wife took after her father more closely in the inner, because she didn't in the outer

woman. At least, I can't say from my own eyes, knowing nothing of old Blowpipes, but I understand she did not favour him in the flesh."

"Not exactly," I answered, with a little smile, as I thought of the loveliness of Kitty's face; "but she was like him a little, just here and there."

"A little won't do. My old *Trunnion*, who croaked in the great frost that almost settled you, my boy, has a son of his old age, *Commodore*, who will be heard of towards July at the Market, scarcely a bit like him in the face, except in one tuck of his nostril, and a tuft of five hairs over his near eye. But do you think I could not swear to him by his ways and tricks, and his style of coming up? That's the time to know what a horse thinks of you; and I tell you this colt thinks exactly as his father did; and all the more, because he isn't like him in the face. There must be the likeness somewhere."

"Yes, I have heard you say that many times before, and I dare say you were right enough about it. But what has that to do with—what has happened to me?"

"Just everything, stupid. Your wife being soft—or credulous, if you like it better—she

sucks in a lot of lies against you. The dose comes from somebody she believes in, not her old enemies of course. Her dignity will not allow her to complain—women are always horribly dignified when jealous—and off she goes, without a word, leaving you to your own conscience, which will more than give you the tip for it. She'll come back by and by, when she has punished you enough; and then of course you'll have to swear, etc., etc. She'll call herself all sorts of names. And there'll be nobody like you, till next time. You'll see if that isn't at the bottom of all this."

"Not likely," I answered with some wrath. "In the first place, my Kitty would never believe a word of such stuff against me, and there is no such thing as jealousy in her nature."

"You know best. But I thought I heard something from the man round the corner at Ludred."

"That was a different thing altogether," I said quickly, although the remembrance struck me, as it had not done before; "and in the next place, if she could be so absurd, she would be the last person in the world to go away without a word, without even giving me a chance of taking my own part. No, that theory

will never do. My Kitty was the most just, as well as the kindest darling ever born."

"You don't know what they are sometimes. How can you expect to know more about them, than they do about themselves? Yesterday, just by way of something, I asked Sally what she would do, if she ever turned up jealous. 'I would grind my ring-finger off,' she said, 'with these two teeth, I would, Sam'—for she has got uncommon grinders—'and I would make my rival swallow it.' Now, Sally has been well broken in, remember, and no vice in the family; at any rate since her great Grand-dam; but her eyes showed that she would do it!"

"There is no ferocity in Kitty," I answered with a lofty air; "I know nothing about race-horses, and very little about women. But women are only men in a better form, more gentle, more just, and more loving. They never give way to such fury as we do——"

"The Professor's wife, for instance, Kit. She never gives way to her temper, does she? Oh dear, no. Even if she has any temper to give way to. A sucking dove—too mild to suck, if her sister wants the pigeon's milk before her."

"She is the exception that proves the rule.

And I doubt whether even she would be so, if she did not suck too much of stronger liquor. And I will tell you another thing, Master Sam, as you have put me up to this; and you have a right to know everything now, that you may understand the case. It knocks your theory on the head. Only I must have your solemn promise, that no one shall ever hear of it."

Sam gave me his pledge; and I knew that he would keep it, for he was well inured to control his tongue. Then I told him, although it went much against the grain, of the disappearance of our stock of money.

"That beats me; at least for the present," he replied; "it don't seem to square with anything. Throws me out of my stride, and makes me cross my legs. But I don't believe she ever took it. How can you tell that she took it, poor chap? If she collared that tin, she will never come back. Was there nobody else could have taken it? The Peelers, for instance, you know what they are? They had the run of the house. I have known a lot of cases——"

"No, it is impossible that they can have touched it. The lock had not been tampered with. The key was in its place, and the last place they would have searched for it. And I

know by the state of the drawer, that no hand but my wife's had been inside it."

"Then you had better not call her your wife, any more." Sam Henderson spoke very sternly; and then, looking at my face, went on more kindly, and with a huskiness in his voice. "You have been unlucky, old chap, as unlucky as any fellow I ever came across, except an old man at York races once. It was not about money that his bad luck was; or I would not compare it with yours, my dear boy. Sorry as I was for your trouble, Kit, I thought it could all be cured, till now. And it can be cured even now, dear Kit; but only as we cure the grief of death. I need not tell you to be a man; for I see that you have been one all along. After what you have told me, I understand your behaviour thoroughly. Before that, I was angry with you, and a little ashamed of you, to tell the truth, for moping here in this way. I thought, 'Why the deuce doesn't he go up and shake the truth out of that old rogue Hotchpot, or that bigger villain, Downy Bulwrag?' But now I see that you could only stay at home, and trust to time to comfort you. And you must weed out, as I would a filly with three legs, a bad lot, a woman who——"

“Stop, Sam,” I cried; “don’t say a word that would make me hate you. Though all appearances are so black, I will never for a moment lose my faith in Kitty. Nobody knows her, as I do. If I never see, or hear of her again, I will say to my last breath, and feel to my last pulse, that she has been deceived, not by me, but about me; and that I have never been deceived in her.”

“Well, old chap, all that I can say is, that you deserve a better wife than was ever yet born. And if your opinion of your wife is true, why, this affair beats any job on the turf, that I ever heard of; and I have heard of a smart few. But I shall keep my eyes open, Kit, and we’ll try to pull it off. I pick up a lot of things you would never think of; and there’s daylight at the bottom of the best tarred sack. Come and see me to-morrow. It will be a little change. And I can show you a young ’un that will take the shine out of all Chalker’s. If you want a pot of money, I can tell you where to get it.”

CHAPTER XVII.

JOB'S COMFORT.

I DID not want any pot of money. And even if I had been filled with that general desire, Henderson's suggestion would have had no charm for me. But I resolved to do a much wiser thing—to stick to my work, with head and hands, and let the heart come after them, if it could, as it grew wiser. The police had made nothing of my case, although they had done their best, no doubt. Whoever had compassed my wife's departure—for I would not call it "flight"—had managed it with much craft; and luck (according to the ancient proverb) had shown a kinsman's love for craft. The lane, at the back of our lonely cottage, was little frequented, except on Sundays, and then in the evening only, for that study of mutual tastes and feelings, which is known as "keeping company." For this it was a popular

resort, and therefore (as usual) called "Love Lane," by blushing youth and maiden. At other times its chief use was to give access to some meadow-land, and its chief wayfarers were four cows, a donkey, and a nanny-goat, belonging to Farmer Osborne. But it wound into divers other lanes, towards Hampton, Tangle Park, and Bedfont, and through some of them to Feltham Station, on the London and South-Western line. That was one of the places where I had made first inquiry; but Sergeant Biggs had been before me, and so he had at Twickenham. And in fact he had sought far and near, and been put upon false scent sometimes, but had hit on nothing genuine.

Whatever any man may say, or even think, or dream of, the opinions of his fellow-men go into his mind, and work there. No one is certain what he believes; or at any rate how he believes it. And the harder he toils to establish his faith, the more apt he is to undermine it. His best plan is never to argue about whatever he longs to trust in; or if his good friends will not let him alone, he should choose for his disputant the sceptic. This will build him up a good deal; not because he has con-

vinced the other man, but because he knows that he must have done so, if the other had been gifted with reason.

And now I was more convinced than ever, by the firm convictions of my Uncle, and Sam, that they both were quite wrong, and that I was quite right. If they had only said that there might be some mistake, something that admitted of a simple explanation, and with patience on our part must receive it, in that case the chances are that I should have been doubtful whether they had any grounds for putting it in that way. But when they came and put it—without asking my opinion—in the very opposite way to that, and the opposite one to what I wanted to believe, their conclusion was a spring-board to send me heels over head to the counter one.

My good Aunt Parslow had been over twice, and held very long talks with Uncle Corny; but I had simply refused to take part in them. To go into all the pros and cons, and hear one say this, and the other say that; all assuming in the calmest manner that they knew at least ten times as much about my poor self, and my richer self, as both of us put together knew, in our most conscientious moments—grateful as I

was, I offered them that view of gratitude, which alone can make a slow shot at her fleeting speed—the instantaneous process. In the twenty-four millionth part of a moment, all her legs have spurned the wind, and the fool who thought to chronicle her, finds her dust upon his glass.

Herein I was not just, or fair; and I have lived to be ashamed of it. But up to this present time of search, I have not come across the man, who continued to be just and fair, while a wrong that went to the bottom of his soul was fresh, and hot, and turbid. Such men there may be, of vast philosophy, or profound religion; but I have never met them yet; and if I do, I shall be afraid of them.

Thus I waited, day by day, slowly quitting hold of hope, hardening myself to do without her, by incessant work of hand. In this I took no pride or pleasure, as a mill finds none in perpetual grind; but from morning twilight till evening dusk, I laboured among the lonely trees. My Uncle begged me to go to London, if only for a little change and stir, as the strawberry season came, and he began to use his stand again. But I felt myself unfit for this, and knew that in my present vein, I should

only do a mischief to him, among his ancient customers. For a happy face and a cheerful spirit do best among the buyers; and a bit of chaff, or a turn of slang, will sometimes help a lame market through. I knew a man once, a mere carter he was, who had never been near "Common Garden" before, but was sent up by a neighbouring Grower, as a last resource, when his salesman fell ill. A mere bumpkin he was, and he wore a smock-frock, and cord trousers tied below the knee; but his round merry face, and broad country brogue, and native simplicity, and twinkling eyes, took the humour of the crowd; and he sold out all his lot at top prices, by looking as fresh as his fruit, before anybody else had got rid of a dozen.

"Well, if you won't go up, you won't," my Uncle said to me one day; "but you will break down, going on like this. I like a young fellow to work; but I can't abide for him to do nothing else, and never think twice of his victuals. And you are spoiling your own chance altogether, in another and a very important affair. Your Aunt Parslow took a great fancy to you, and she meant to come down handsome when she dies. She told me

that, almost in so many words. And now you are setting her quite against you. You know how you behaved, the last time she came over."

"I could not endure her perpetual talk. You can't say that I was rude to her. But I don't want her money. What good is it to me? I wish she had never given us a farthing."

"It is nasty rubbish to talk like that, Kit; and every one will turn against you. You used to have such a lot of common sense. Well, perhaps you were not exactly rude to her; or at least you did not mean to be. But there is nothing ruder, as women look at it, than to let them have all the talk to themselves; although they insist upon it, if you don't. You must not interrupt them, of course; but still you must say enough to show that you are listening, and that you think highly of what they are saying; though of course you knew it all, before they began. Instead of that, what did you do? You crossed your legs; women never like that, when they are talking to you, any more than a lap-dog who wants to jump up. I don't know why it is; but they never can bear it. And you did worse than that. The clock struck five, and you began to count

it. You young fellows never behave well to ladies."

"I am sure I did not mean to offend her, Uncle. I never thought twice of what I was doing."

"Exactly. And you should have thought of nothing else, while you seemed to think only of what she was saying. But I want you to do me a favour, Kit. I suppose you don't wish to offend me too?"

"Certainly not. Because you are reasonable, and have always been so good to me. I will do anything to oblige you, Uncle Corny."

"And by doing it, you will oblige yourself. You are wearing your fingers to the bone, and all the flesh off your other bones, by this confounded stubbornness. I hate to hear the tap of your hammer almost, much as I used to like it. Now, just take old *Spanker* to-morrow afternoon, and drive over to your Aunt's at Leatherhead, with the basket of strawberries I promised her. She doesn't know what a good strawberry is; eleven people out of a dozen don't; any more than a babe that just opens his mouth. She has plenty of her own, I know; but none worth the trouble of eating. To-morrow will be Saturday. You can stop till Monday; and it will

do you a lot of good, and set you up again almost. There is nothing like a woman in a case like yours. You let her talk on, and you never contradict her, and she says to herself—‘Well, I have done him good!’ And so she has; not the way she meant it; but by making you think that they are all alike, and not a bit of solid sense among them. And it is not only that, but you are pleased to think how much better you know things than they do; though you don’t say one word to their fifty. Whenever I am bothered, or cheated, or insulted, I get a nice woman to talk to me; and it is as good as a pipe of the best Birdseye; which you can have at the same time, if you know how to do it.”

“You seem to look at things for your own advantage only,” I answered, because I thought these views low; “however I will do as you wish; and Sunday is a dreadful day for me here, without any work. I thought last Sunday would never end; and not being a woman, I could not come and comfort you.”

I was pleased with this rap at him; because I could not see what business he had with nice women, and so on; whether they came to his house to talk with him, or whether he went to have his pipe at theirs, as he had almost let out

by his last words. For there never was a woman, who could stop him of a pipe in his own house—that was certain. But that he should talk of my being stubborn, amused me, every time I thought of it. Verily if I had a splinter of that substance in me, he was the oak from which it came; and he might have spared enough to roof a church, without anybody asking how he was.

Now he wrote to my Aunt that I was coming, according to her proposal, and he made Tabby Tapscott come up to the cottage, and pack up a few things for me, inasmuch as I had no one now to do it. And he had his best strawberries picked in the morning, before the sun margarined them, and kept in a cold place till I was ready, and then packed so that no heat could get at them. And as *Spanker* had not been to London for three days, he was sure to strike out at a merry pace, when he found himself free of the Country. For I never saw a horse that liked to go to London; any more than a man loves a cemetery.

Spanker was as gay as May, as soon as he knew where he was going; and he roused up each hill with a rush from the other, which showed a deep sense of Mechanics. Nobody

would have believed his age, even if he had told it truly; which he had strong human reason for not attempting, having found his teeth filed quite early.

What with the brisk air of those hills, and the soft turn of the valleys, and the gaiety of the time of year, a quantity of heaviness went from me, and a vein of health flowed in. Not that I ever said to myself—as people of inconstant nature do,—“There are better fish in the sea,” etc.; or, “If she be not fair to me;” or even so much as, “Care killed the cat.” My mood was neither independent nor defiant, and I felt as respectful towards women as ever. It was only that more hope came inside me, from seeing so much in the world outside; and perhaps more faith in the Lord, because He was doing His best so largely. However, I never thought twice about that, and must claim no credit for it.

Aunt Parslow was not very gracious at first, though she could not find fault with the strawberries. She pretended that she had some quite as good; though she declared herself to be most grateful. But as soon as I said, “Send for some of your own; that will be the true proof of the pudding, Aunt,” she discovered

that her own were not quite at their best just now, and in fact they had been so good, that the slugs and the blackbirds could not resist them. This showed very little self-command on their part; for there was not a good fruit among them, as I found out on Sunday, the beds being a mixture of some twenty kinds, growing in great tussocks, and for the most part barren, which was just as well.

I let my Aunt have her own way, as a man should let all women do, except those of his own household; and by and by she became more pleasant, especially when she had discovered—as she did at dinner-time—that my present state of health required a bottle of her dry Champagne. Being compelled myself, I thought it just to use coercion too, and had the satisfaction soon of finding her much more ladylike. Her coldness towards me passed away, and when we had clinked our glasses twice, we resumed our proper footing.

“You don’t fill up,” she said more than once, and I found the same fault with her; and when that error had been removed, we could enter into one another’s feelings.

“The great thing you want is nourishment,” she said, when I had made a noble dinner;

“people in the present age never attach sufficient importance to that point. They indulge too much in stimulants—no more, Kit, no more, or at the outside, only half; fill your own, for you require it—while they scarcely allow themselves time to take the proper amount of substance. Through a very old and deeply respected friend of our family in the City, a man of the loftiest principles, I am enabled to get the real turtle at half-price; and it has been instrumental, under Providence, in the restoration of your health. I have sent him a telegram; and to-morrow, although it is the Sabbath-day, we shall find a tin here, when we return from church. It is better than Grove’s, or any that you see in the windows going down Cheapside. A turtle should never be allowed to sprawl about barbarously in the sun. It is against his nature, and it does him harm. He becomes demoralized, and loses firmness. They say that we all spring from turtles now; but I cannot believe it; for cannibalism is never nice, and turtle is. What a turtle your Uncle Cornelius would have made!”

“I am glad that you find him so nice,” I replied; “but he would always have tasted of tobacco.”

“Well, we must allow for one another; and there is no accounting for tastes. *Jupiter* likes turtle; but the other dogs won’t touch it. I had a dog once who would eat cigars. If he found a stump in the road, it was quite as good as a bone to him; but he did not live very long, poor fellow! Now let them take away the things; and when you have had your glass of port, come to me in the drawing-room. Don’t hurry, because I mean to have my nap.”

As yet, she had never mentioned Kitty’s name, which surprised me not a little; but I thought it likely that she was still rather sore at my behaviour. For when she had come to see us lately, it had been more than I could bear to listen calmly while everybody offered any sort of guess; just as they might discuss a case of abduction in the papers, or the theft of a female dog, who “answered to the name of **Kitty.**”

CHAPTER XVIII.

TRUE COMFORT.

EVERY allowance should be made for a man who is in deep trouble. Not because it is his due, for that would count but little; but because he expects it, which he never does of his other debts, after experience. But he does hope to receive fine feeling, when he knows how cheap it is; and his sense of bad luck blackens in him, when he cannot even get that much.

And yet he ought to feel how trumpery are his trivial joys and sorrows, in the whirligig of this great world. He does his utmost thus to take it; to shudder at the wrongs of others, and to glow at their redress, to suck his fingers more and more with the relish of his neighbour's pie; and perhaps with practice he begins to get some moonlight pleasure thus. But alas, before he is perfect in it, some little turn of thought comes home, some soft remembrance

thrills his heart, as the sun quivers in a well-spring, and all his nature lets him know that he belongs to it, and is itself.

A little touch of this kind took me, when I was full of higher things, or at least was trying so to be. I had not been to church since my day of dole, my day of doom and desolation. How could I go to Sunbury Church, and see the spot where Kitty stood and stole my whole devotion, and see the altar-rails where she had knelt and vowed herself mine for ever ; and now, with no Kitty at my side, be stared at by a hundred eyes, all asking—"Well, how do you get on?" But now in this strange place, I went to the Sunday morning service, though Kitty had been there too with me, in the happy days not long gone by. My Aunt came with me, and with much fine feeling allowed me to sit where my dear had sat, and to put my hat on the selfsame peg on which she had placed it for me.

At first it was a bitter time ; but I went through it bravely, though at first I could not bring myself to open the Prayer-book, which I had brought in the bag with my clothes from Sunbury. My wife had given it to me at Baycliff, when I happened to admire it in a

window, and I remembered that she had written "Kit," and nothing else, on the fly-leaf.

But the first psalm for that morning service, being a very sad one, suited my state of mind so well that I opened my book to follow it. And I remember reading with all my heart—"My heart is smitten down, and withered like grass; so that I forget to eat my bread. I am become like a pelican in the wilderness; and like an owl that is in the desert."

Perhaps through the shaking of my thumb, the cover of the book fell back, and showed me some words on the fly-leaf written with a pencil by my own wife. Before the word "Kit," which was in ink, she had written with a pencil "Darling," and after it, "God's will be done." The writing was faint, as if the pencil wanted cutting, and it seemed to have been dashed off in great haste.

This then was her farewell to me. I was sure that the words had not been there, the last time I used the Prayer-book; and indeed there would have been no meaning in them. Over and over again I read them, forgetting everything else, I fear, and standing up after the first lesson had begun, until my Aunt gave my coat a jerk. I longed to rush out of the

church and think; and the rest of the service went by me, as a dream.

Though very little light was thrown hereby upon my dark enigma, I found more comfort perhaps than reason would warrant, in this discovery. In the first place, if my wife had left me, in bitterness at some fancied wrong, she would never have addressed me thus; and this alone removed a weight of misery from my bosom. For it had been agony to me to think, as I could not help doing, that my own Kitty all this while was nursing bitterness against me, as if it had been possible for me to wrong her. And again that she should not have gone entirely without a word, was a piece of real comfort to me; though others, who have not been so placed, may think that I was foolish there. Very likely I was; but never mind. The Prayer-book, as we all acknowledge, is a very noble work; and nobody can write such English now, as is to be found in it at every page; and I think that Kitty was quite right in choosing it for her last word to me. But if it comes to that, she was always right; at least according to my ideas.

Strange as it may seem to some—who cannot enter into odd states of mind, such as long had

been my lot—I did not say a word, as yet, to my Aunt Parslow about this matter. She had formed her own theory, like everybody else, and I meant to let her go through with it. And so she did, that afternoon, having put great pressure upon herself—for my sake, as she told me—to enable her to hold her tongue, until she could speak with advantage, and without any risk of being taken by any one for a meddler.

For she liked to dine early on Sundays, and she always denied herself the pleasure of going to church in the afternoon, being one of the most unselfish persons I have ever met with. After a dinner not to be gainsaid, at any rate till supper-time, we sat in the garden and listened to the bells, and thought with pleasure of the congregation now going to have a hot time of it. I was full of tender recollections, for this was the very spot where Kitty had shown some delightful want of reason about Sally Chalker. And I told my Aunt all about it now, with a sigh at the back of every smile. Then she laughed with superior wisdom, and no longer could contain herself.

“I knew she was a jealous little puss. Every woman has her fault, almost as much as men

have. It took me a long time to discover any fault in her, until I started that idea myself. To make up for the want of other faults, she has that one to an extreme, you see. And that is at the bottom of your present trouble, my poor boy. But she has carried it to an extreme, I admit. It seems a little too absurd."

"It is too absurd to be thought of twice," I answered rather savagely; "my Kitty is not quite a fool. And she would have been something worse than a fool, if she had acted from that motive. She would have been unjust and cruel, not to afford me so much as a chance of clearing myself from wicked lies. Our married life was short indeed; but long enough for her to learn that I am not a scoundrel."

"Don't be so hot, Kit. You have no idea what a woman's mind is. She thought you, of course, a perfect angel, and herself not good enough to wipe your shoes. She was always humble, as you know; and that tyrant of a woman must have beaten into her poor head a bitter sense of her own defects. It is only natural, she would think, that this great wonder of a man should want some one better than poor me. And when some villain laid before her some strong evidence, we know not what,

she would say to herself—‘It is as I thought. I will not trouble him to explain. I will leave him for a while, and perhaps his love will return, when he has lost me. With this in my heart, I could not bear to look at him, and know all the while he was longing to be rid of me. I will have no scene, which would only make him think even less of me than he does.’ And so she would go, without caring where.”

“Possibly, Aunt, some women might have done so. But not Kitty. She felt to her heart my affection for her; and she trusted me, as I trusted her. Do you suppose that if what you say had even seemed possible to me, I should have remained, as I have done, waiting for some news of her. I should have rushed up to every one, who had any motive for deceiving her, and taken them by the throat, and wrung their wicked murderous lies out. No, it is something much worse than that. If Kitty had left me in petulance, would she have written these last words, would she have called me her ‘darling Kit’? See what I found this morning.”

“That proves nothing,” resumed my Aunt, when I had shown her my Prayer-book, and we had discussed that matter; “she may very

well have relented, at the last moment, and written that to you."

"Then would she have taken all our money? Was that the way to cure my jealousy, and bring me back to her in penitence? She had a right to the money, because you put it into her own hand. But I am astonished at her taking it."

Miss Parslow was even more astonished, when I told her that part of the tale, which I had begged Uncle Corny not to do. It grieved me that she should ever hear of it; but she certainly had the right to know.

"Perhaps you told her in so many words that you meant it entirely for herself," I suggested, hoping that it might be so; for, little as I cared for that trumpery loss, I was cut to the quick that my wife should have inflicted it; "Kitty must have believed it her own, or she never would have touched it."

"I said nothing of the kind," my Aunt replied indignantly; "I gave it to her, but I meant it for you—that is to say conjointly. Her taking it was robbery, and nothing else."

I laughed a little at these words, which I had heard from other quarters. That my Kitty should be called a robber, seemed a little too

absurd. But I could not be angry, in the teeth of facts, at any rate with the donor.

"I'll tell you what it is," she said, even as I had been told before; "either your wife is as deep a little hypocrite as ever lived, which I cannot believe, for I should never trust any one again if I did; or else she ran away from you in a moment of insanity. My poor boy, I am so sorry for you. I cannot bear to ask you, but have you ever noticed any tendency that way—anything even odd, or absent, or inconsequential in her manner? The Professor is a very queer man, I have heard. All great men of science are—well, to say the least, eccentric."

"Captain Fairthorn is perfectly sound and clear-headed, though not a good man of business. And his daughter is as rational as I am—much more so, if I am to endure much more of this. She is quick, and bright-witted, and full of common sense; except that, like her father, she is a little too confiding. I never saw a token of even the slightest absence of mind about her. Her only insanity was that she loved me a great deal better than she loved herself. I believe she would have laid down her life with pleasure——"

"Don't talk about it, my dear Kit. I think

you have borne things wonderfully well, now that I know all you have told me. And you must not break down now, my dear. All will come right in the end, be sure, although we are in thick darkness now. In spite of all difficulties, I still hold to my idea of jealousy. However we won't talk of that any more. You know that I called upon Miss Coldpepper, the last time I was at Sunbury?"

"Yes. But I never heard what she said. I cannot see how she could help us at all."

"Well, I thought it worth while to try; and I found her much kinder than I expected. A little bit stiff at first perhaps, and rather of the grand lady style; but I am sure that she would help you, if she could. She likes Kitty better than her own nieces; that I am quite sure of; and she does not side a bit with that horrid Mrs. Fairthorn, at least as everybody makes her out, though I always form my own opinion. She perceived, of course, that I was a lady, and not to be treated as a fruit-grower might be, such as everybody looks upon as a sort of apple-pie. I explained that my connection with your Uncle Orchardson was casual, and had been against my wishes; while my family had been in the China-trade;

and she asked very kindly, if I would have a cup of tea. I accepted, because I knew how it makes ladies talk. Then she asked me what I thought of it, and I said it was poor stuff; for I had no idea of being patronised by her, and I saw that she had sense enough to like the truth, especially when it was to her advantage, although not very complimentary. Then she asked me where she could get a better article; and I told her that I never recommended any place, having nothing to do with any business now, but living in a very pretty place of my own. Naturally this made her press me more; and not liking to be disagreeable, I told her of a place, where by taking twelve pounds she could get a tea worth two of hers, for fifteen pence a pound less money. And this made a very fine impression upon her; for she loves good value for her money. Then she became very gracious indeed; especially after her cur of a dog came in, and smelling souvenirs of my high breed, did his utmost to improve himself, by licking them. For your sake, Kit, I was obliged to say, that the wretched mongrel looked well-bred. Oh dear, oh dear!"

"Well, never mind, Aunt; he has done me a good turn——" I remembered in time to stop

sharply. My Aunt Parslow would take it as worse than high treason, that I should have stolen even such a dog; and how could I call it a good turn now?

“No dog would do you a bad turn, Kit,” she continued quite serenely; “at any rate no well-bred dog; they are as good as a woman, and infinitely better than any man, in judging human character. Now listen to what I have to say. I am not very sharp, for I live out of the world; and everybody owns that it gets much worse, from year to year, and from day to day. But I don’t care twopence for that, my dear, because nothing I can do will alter it. Only I am as sure as I am of the nature of the very best dog I ever had—and there he lies, beneath that tree—that your Kitty has never done a thing to wrong you, at least according to her view of things. I will not attempt to explain that money matter; for it is beyond me, and I am sorry that I spoke so harshly. I should have considered your feelings more, for I know that you are as true as steel. There is some black secret that we cannot pierce; it will all become clear as the day, in time; and in time, I hope, for your happiness. I can well understand that you have been stopped in all your inquiries, by

that strange device—for I believe it to be but another device, on the part of some very crafty foe. You have let some weeks go by, through that. No good has ever come, so far as I know, of any of those ‘Private Inquiry’ places; and I hate the very name of them. But I think that you are bound to watch the proceedings of those two villains, who carried off your Kitty, to that vile place near Hounslow. Of course, they would never take her there again. That you have ascertained long ago. And I do not believe that they have got her now. She would be no good to them, as a married woman. But they know where she is. I am sure of that. You have been in a maze of dejection and distress. And your pride has prevented you from doing what you should have done. Go and see those two men. Hunt them out. Take the matter entirely into your own hands. Your Uncle Cornelius is very good and kind. But it is not his wife who is missing.”

“Those two men are not in London. That much has been ascertained,” I said; “and it does not appear that they were in London, at the time—at the time of my trouble.”

“Never mind. Find out where they are. Follow them; never mind where it is. As for

money, you shall have another hundred pounds, and a thousand if it proves needful. Don't thank me, Kit. It is for my own peace. I have not enjoyed seeing a dog eat his dinner, since this wickedness was done. You shall thank me as much as ever you like, when you have got your Kitty back again. And she will love you ten times more than ever."

CHAPTER XIX.

BEHIND THE FIDDLE.

It is vain for any man to say that, in the deepest depths of woe, he can receive no scrap of comfort from the tenderness of others. Words may help him very little; commonplace exhortations are a weariness to the worn-out soul; he lies at the bottom of his own distress, and does not want it probed or touched. But gradually a little light and warmth steal through the darkness, not direct from heaven alone, but reflected from kind eyes and hearts. He is not alone in the world, although he ever must be lonely; and the sense of other life than his restores him slowly to his own.

After all the kindness shown me, and the good will wholly undeserved, I felt ashamed to be so swallowed up by my own sorrow. Some indulgence I might claim from people of kindly nature, on the ground that it was not sorrow

only, but dark mystery and doubt, and even some sense of black disgrace, which had robbed me of my proper vigour and due power of manhood. And it is more than likely that the long and wasting illness, from which I had not yet quite recovered, still impaired the force and tone of mind as well as body. But I do not want to make excuses, as people nearly always say in the very breath they make them with. Only I was now resolved that no more should be needed.

On the Monday, I drove *Spanker* home ; which was a great delight to him, and to me as well, for the world looked brighter, when my face was set to fight it. Or rather I should say, to fight that vile and wicked part of it, which had robbed me of my just claim to a happy though humble place in it. In my breast-pocket I carried the book containing my wife's last words to me ; for my good Aunt Parslow had kindly stitched it in a white kid glove, or a pair of them, which had been white in their early days. And in the pocket on the other side, I carried fifty pounds in bank-notes, so as to be able to start well, and procure better judgment than my own, if it should appear advisable. But about that I was not sure as

yet; being very loth to ask any other man's opinion, however old he might be, about my pretty Kitty.

It was now the longest day, which is the most excellent and perfect time of year, in at least three years out of every four. Sometimes there arises a strong hot June; but scarcely more than once in twenty summers; and then, before the days come to their turn, leaves are getting flabby, and the grass is overripe, and the petals of the wild-rose lie in the ditch, and the blossom of the wheat has dropped its little quivery bee's-wing. More often there has been a black Pentecost, a May of lowering skies and blight, with every animal's coat put the wrong way on his back; and then a June of shrink and shiver, without a fair flower in the garden, and with the hedgerows full of black caterpillars. And every man flaps himself with his arms, like a cock when he springs up to crow; but the hedger and ditcher has nothing to crow at, and is too hoarse to do it, if he had.

But now we had a very fair midsummer, neither too hot nor too cold; and the air was not only fresh but soft, and full of sweet yet invigorating smells. At the top of every hill, one seemed to sniff the rich calm of the valley, and

again in the valley to feel the crisp air of the hill coming down for a change of mood; there was nothing to make much fuss about in the way of striking scenery; but a pretty peep could be had at almost every turn of travelling, where green leaves softened the brilliant sky, and sheep and cattle, in quiet pastures, showed that they accepted life, as if it were a blessing.

But I found my Uncle regarding life from a very different point of view. He had brought all his strawberry-pickers in at three o'clock that morning, to make the great hit of the summer, as he hoped, in the Monday forenoon market. At six a.m. he had sent off about five hundredweight of prime fruit, all in pound punnets with dewy leaves, as fresh as the daybreak, and as bright as the sun, before it leaves off blushing. But ere he could put one upon his stand, one hundred and twenty tons of French stuff, which had been discharged the night before, were running, like a flood from some horse-knacker's, in every alley of the market. This refuse was offered, by the bucketful, at a penny a pound, which was too much for it; a dumpy, and flabby, and slimy mass, fit for children to make dirt-pies of. Of course the good buyers would not look at it, for no man could put it in his window. But the

British public could put it in their stomachs, which is not at all a choice receptacle ; and the mere fact of its presence took the shine out of all fair English fruit. Uncle Corny's choice *Presidents*, and *Dr. Hoggs*, as good as if they leaped from stalk to lip, became jam for the Juggernaut of free trade ; and he was left lamenting, as well as swearing very hard.

Whenever he had used strong language,—however well justified by international law—he was apt to show less of true penitence, than of anger with the world that had made him do it. Being a righteous man, he always felt ashamed ; but he never was known to retract an expression ; though he often declared that his words had been too weak, and he wished he had said what he was charged with saying. But Selsey Bill told me that he had been “just awful,” and they were expecting beer all round, as a token of remorse. “Said a’ would sack every son of a gun of us ! Never knowed ’un say that, wi’out sending can out by and by. Ah, he is a just man, Master Kit, if ever was one.”

“Glad to see you, Kit,” said my Uncle, who was getting, with the aid of a pipe, into his right mind. “You are looking ever so much

better, my boy. Can't return the compliment, I fear. The fact is, I have been a little put out; though I never lost my temper, as most people would have done. Fearful smash this morning at the Garden. But all the poor fellows did their very best, and it would not be fair to punish them. They've been hard at it, ever since three o'clock. You might take the four-gallon can, if you like, just to show them that you are come home again. And I dare say, you'll be glad of a glass yourself, for the roads are getting dusty. You can come and talk to me, when you've been round. Only half a pint each for the women, mind. It would never do to get them into bad habits. Unless any of them has a baby."

When I had discharged that little duty, I told him of all that my Aunt had said, and showed him the message to me in the book, if indeed it could be called a message. He shook his head very wisely over this, and told me that he must think about it; for he could not at present see the meaning of it. But I saw that it altered his opinion of the case.

"You have been up to the cottage already, I see," he continued, as I sat quietly, after vainly searching once more the columns of his paper

the *Standard*, as I daily did; “you will never find any notice there, my boy, nor in any other paper. It is the blackest puzzle I ever came across; and this only makes it the blacker. Mother Bull is come back”—he should have said, “the Honourable Mrs. Bulwrag Fairthorn”—“I was told so yesterday by that good woman, who came down when you were so ill. You know the woman I mean—Mrs. Wilcox. She was down here yesterday to ask for you, and was very sorry not to find you. She said that if Mother Bull had not been away, she could have sworn that it was all her doing. But now she doubts whether she knew anything about it; for when she does a thing, she always does it by herself, and never trusts any one with her wicked works. Mrs. Wilcox has not heard a word from your wife, as I need not tell you; but she flies in a fury at the smallest hint that there can be any fault on her part. She says that poor Kitty could never plot anything, even if she wished it. Her mind is too simple, and she could never carry out any plan requiring sharp management. I asked her what she thought of it all, and she could think of nothing at all worth speaking of. Only that there is something we don’t know—which I could have

told her, without walking a mile. But I think it might do you good to go and see her; and it would comfort you at any rate, for she holds all your own opinions. And she said one thing which I thought right, and sharper of her than I expected, for it never had occurred to me—that you should take in one of those scientific journals, which give an account of discoveries and all that; so as to find out, if you can, where Professor Fairthorn is.”

“How can that do any good?” I asked. “He had sailed at least ten days before I was forsaken, and while we were down at Baycliff. The telegram from Falmouth proved all that.”

“That is clear enough. And of course he cannot help us, while he is far away at sea. But for all that, we are bound to let him know, if there should be any chance. You would write to him, or write at him, if his daughter was dead; and it is very much the same case now.”

“Uncle Corny, you have the most cold-blooded way sometimes, though you never mean it. Certainly I am bound to let him know, if I can; and I ought to have thought of it before. But he has given us little of his company. I will go and see Mrs. Wilcox

to-morrow, if only to find out what paper to get; for she will know what they used to take in. And I shall find out what is going on up there; though I don't see how it will help me much."

"When that dog was stolen from Miss Coldpepper," said my Uncle, without meaning any harm, "by some big rogue in London, what did she do? Why, she offered a reward at once, and sent posters right and left. And what was the result? Why, the dog came back almost before she had time to miss him."

"But if he came back without any reward, what could the reward have to do with it?"

"How do you know that no reward was paid?" My Uncle seemed quite to look suspicious; but perhaps it was my conscience that made him do it. "We can't tell what happened between them, up there."

"Certainly not," I replied with haste; "but I don't like talking about a dog, in the same breath with my Kitty."

"I did not mean to annoy you, Kit," he answered very humbly; "although the poor lady may have felt it bitterly, in her little way. All that I meant was, that we might have offered a large reward for any information. It

could have done no harm, you know. And it might have come to Kitty's ears, and inclined her to come back to us. Women are so glad to save expense."

"How can you understand such things? As if I could bear to fetch my wife home, by jingling a purse before the world! If she won't come back without that, she had better—she had better almost stay away."

"Very well. I can understand your feelings; and very likely I should have the same. You are like me, Kit, in many things; although a deal more obstinate."

My Uncle was fond of saying this; but it always took my breath away, from the sublimity of his self-ignorance. It was like an oak-tree bidding an osier not to be so gnarled and stiff.

"Now remember one thing," he went on, as he saw me smiling just a little; "in spite of your stubbornness, you shall obey me, or I will know the reason why. You have tried what good hard work would do, and it has done you more harm than good. Because your mind has not been in it, and you have only been fretting at every stroke, though you stuck to it, like a Briton. To-day you are twice the man, because you have had a little change, and seen a little

of a different life, and allowed yourself to speak more freely of your sad affairs, instead of snapping at every one who mentioned them. Henceforth, you shall never do more than eight hours' work in these gardens in one day, I mean of course all by yourself. For sixteen hours every day, you have avoided every one, and carried on work, work, all alone, as if you never meant to speak again. I am pretty tough; but it would have killed me, although I am no chatterbox. And it has gone some way towards killing you. I left you to your own foolish plan, because of your confounded obstinacy. But now, I will try to be as stubborn myself. I will come after you, with my supple-jack, unless you give me your word on this. And another thing you must bear in mind. You have taken your good Aunt's money for a particular purpose; and you will have had it on false pretences, if you go on thus."

"I intend to use it for what she meant. I would never have taken it otherwise. You shall not complain of my sticking too close, but rather of my absence. But I shall not draw my weekly money from you, unless I have done a good week's work. To-morrow I shall do very little, because I am going to London. To-

night I shall work for an hour or two, because I have a job to finish. And I will look in, when you are having your last pipe."

There was every promise of a fruitful season, though not without plenty to grumble at, for I never knew a season good all round, such as more favoured countries have. After getting myself into working trim, I left my lonely little dwelling, with the front door so arranged that any one who knew the trick could enter without knocking. And in the kitchen fireplace—for I never used the parlour now—I left a little coke alight, so that it would smoulder on for hours, and could soon, with the aid of wood and coal, be nursed into glow enough to boil the kettle, which stood ready upon the hob. For I always fancied, when I went to work, that I might find my wife, when I should come home, making it a home for me once more, and listening to the singing of the kettle. And I left the lane-door unfastened too, that she might have no trouble to get in.

Somehow or other, I seemed to feel that something strange would befall me that night, but I went about my work as usual. I had a large peach-tree to go over, for the second time that season, fetching every shoot into place,

checking or sometimes cutting out the over-coarse and sappy growth, nipping every blistered leaf, removing the fruit, where it grew too thick or had no chance of swelling, and offering the many other small attentions, without which fine fruit may not be. And outside the border on the gravel walk I had the garden engine full of water for the nightly bath, which fruit and foliage in warm weather love, as much as vermin hate it.

The sun had been down for an hour or more, and the dusk was deepening into night, and I was just at the point of leaving off for fear of hammering the wrong sort of nail—when I heard a little sound, like the scraping of a twig, and turning my head, without any great hurry, beheld, as distinctly as I see this paper, the face of a man looking steadfastly at me. It was a large and solid face, as calm and unmoved as the full moon appears rising out of the haze on a fine summer night.

I could see no hat above the face, nor any human figure below it, only a face looking through a gap in a clipped *arbor vitæ* tree, about fifteen yards from where I stood. It was gazing at me quite serenely, and as if I were hardly worth the trouble.

Through all the time of my long distress, I had wholly lost the sense of fear—bodily fear I mean, and nervous trembling, such as brave men have. This had surprised me more than once; things that used to make me jump had not the least effect on me. The reason was simply that my life was not of the smallest value to me. And I wondered that I was not frightened now, because I knew that I ought to be.

Without even taking my hammer up, I leaped across the border, to seize this fellow; but my foot caught in something, and down I went. A heavy garden-line had been left, stretched along by one of our men, who had been “making up the edge” that day. I knew it was there, but had not thought of it in my hurry; and now I was lame in both knees for a minute, for the shock had been very violent. At first I thought that my left leg was broken; but after a bit of rubbing it got better, and I hobbled towards the *Thuja* tree, which had been clipped into the shape of a fiddle by Bill Tompkins.

I dragged myself round it; but saw no one, nor even a footprint in the waning of the light; neither was there any sound among the trees

beyond it. Wondering greatly, and very angry with the fellow who had left the line there, I collected my tools with some difficulty, and was obliged to leave the tree unsyringed. Then, as I went stiffly home, I thought of the fuss my Kitty would have made, to see me in that bleeding hobble; and if I was weak in body through it, I fear that I was weaker still in mind.

CHAPTER XX.

THE GREAT LADY.

AT this time, I slept, or lay down to sleep, on a couple of good-sized chairs in the kitchen, with a cushion laid along them, which had come from my Uncle's pew in Sunbury Church. He had established a new cushion there, on the strength of my marriage and Kitty's good clothes; and the old one, being stuffed with sound horsehair, was not to be despised when upside down. And to save all risk of rolling off, I set it against the front legs of the dresser. The door of the room was left wide open, and the front door also, unless the night was windy; for I had nothing to lose, having lost my all; and I only wished that anybody would come and try to rob me. It would have been bad for him, unless he had been either Hercules, or Ulysses; for I was armed with recklessness, and eager to tackle any open foe. Nervousness (such as a happy man may

feel, when he hears a strange noise in the dead of the night) was an unknown power to me now, and I would have fought, like a bull-dog in his own kennel, and enjoyed it. This was not the proper turn of mind for a young man to indulge in. That I knew as well as could be; but the blame lay elsewhere.

Although I was very stiff and sore from the bruises of that awkward fall, I went at daylight to examine the place, where that stranger must have stood. The ground was dry and hard just there; but I found enough to show me that I had not been deceived by any trick of the imagination. Not only had the soil been trodden by a foot unlike my own, but the thick mat of the *Thuja* tree had some of the lobed leaves (which composed it and stood together like moss compressed), ruffled and crushed into one another, as if by the thrust of a heavy form. Then I went to the place where I had stood over against the peach-tree, and put my hat on a nail to represent my height, and returning to the clipped tree gazed through the nick of the fiddle at it, just as the face had gazed at me. I was obliged to stoop, to bring my eyes to the level at which those eyes had been; which showed that my visitor had been

of some three or four inches lower stature, probably not more than five feet ten.

I could not trace his footsteps far, nor make out what kind of boots he wore, except that there was no sign of hob-nails, such as all our workmen had. It struck me that a man with such a face was not very likely to hurry himself, and the ground bore no traces of hasty flight, neither were the branches of the plum-trees (through which he must have retreated) broken. Probably he had retired at his leisure, while I was disabled from following. There were no signs of entrance to be discovered at or near the door into Love Lane; all our men had left work at the time of his visit, and no one had seen any stranger.

What on earth had he come for, was the question which arose, and could not be answered. There was nothing much to steal just there, for none of the tree-fruit was ripe; and though darkness forbade entire certainty, I felt pretty sure that the owner of that face would call himself a gentleman. It seemed to me better upon the whole to say nothing about the matter, for my Uncle would probably laugh at it, as the product of my imagination; and as for the Police, I knew too well that they would make

nothing out of it. Only it was evident to my mind that this little adventure had some bearing on my trouble; and in spite of the dusk, I could swear to that face, wherever I should come across it.

My Uncle would have stopped me from going to London, on account of the injuries which I could not hide, for my hands as well as my knees were cut. But I went by the 'bus, being very lame as yet, and unable to walk without aid of a stick. Mrs. Wilcox received me very kindly, and I was glad to find her business thriving, and the sharp boy released from the pots, and growing very useful at the counter.

"It has done him a deal of good, indeed it has, Mr. Kit," she said, when I ventured to hint that his employment had not been elevating; "he knows every soul it is safe to give tick to; and as for bad shillings, of which I had a dozen, not one have we took since he come back. Ah, what a tradesman he will make! But now, sir, about your poor dear self. No one to stitch your knees better than that—ah, the righteous is always punished in this earth."

I told her exactly how things stood—that everything was as dark as ever, that the neighbourhood had been searched in vain (as might

have been expected), that one or two false clues had been followed, not by myself, but by the Police, and that now I meant to take the matter entirely into my own hands, as I should have done at first except for a private reason, which I told her, to wit the disappearance of the money. She was angry that this should have been allowed to hinder me even for a day. But when I told her how it weighed upon my spirits, and seemed to show that my wife was not at all in her duty to me, Mrs. Wilcox sided with me, and said that every one must do the same, whether I were right in the end or wrong. And then I asked her what she thought; and she said that she was afraid to say.

“Not that I don’t know her, sir,” she proceeded when she saw my disappointment; “as well as the inside of my own shoe, having had her almost from the bottle, and cut the best of her teeth on my own thumb. But they changes so, when they falls in love, as I know from my own experience, though going on then for thirty-five, that to make a prediction comes back on the mouth. I began it already; but it turned out wrong; and I said to myself—‘If you want to be considered above the average, as you always was, you better wait, and see how the cat jumps

first.' For that is the way of the women, sir, in general."

I was not in the mood to be satisfied with this, especially as she had said the same thing to my Uncle, as late as last Sunday. And gradually, by coaxing her to begin, and then contradicting her upon some little point of fact, I knew her opinions even better than my own, for my own had less to go upon. For it must be borne in mind that most of what I have entered about Sir Cumberleigh Hotchpot, and Mr. Donovan Bulwrag, comes from knowledge which I obtained long afterwards; and none of it was in my mind as yet, beyond what my Uncle Corny, and Sam Henderson, had said, and the little that had been dropped by Kitty, who had scarcely had three weeks as yet to talk.

"Well, I shall do this," I said at last to Mrs. Wilcox; "you have told me many things which will enable me to get on. Nothing can be worse than things are now; and the greatest enemy I have got—if I am good enough to have an enemy—cannot say that I have shown impatience. I have felt enough of it; but nobody knows but myself how close I have kept it. I mean to make no disturbance now; but I shall just go and see the great lady."

"You'd better not, sir," cried Mrs. Wilcox; "you would be like a dummy, if she chose to speak out, and the humour might be on her. And you can't get nothing out of her, except hard knocks."

"Hard words break no bones, any more than soft ones butter parsnips. I shall go and see her, if I can, and that villain of a son of hers as well. It is my duty to discover where my Kitty's father is."

"She won't see you, Mr. Kit; unless it is to triumph over you. She loves doing that, when any one is down. But you won't have a chance of seeing Mr. Downy. They say he is out of the country altogether, though my little Teddy swears he saw him Sunday night, and I never knew him go wrong about a face before. But he must be wrong this time, if there is any truth in words. And generally always he comes down this road, whenever he is at home."

"At any rate, I shall ask for him. By the by, what is he like, if I should chance to meet him?"

"He have a great square face, sir, like the front of a big head, with a lot of sandy hair both above it and below. And he comes along the road with his eyes half-shut, just as if

there was nothing worth looking at. And his eyes are as yellow as 'new-run' honey, and a few butter-spots upon his cheeks, where you can see them. He is a square-built young man, not so tall as you, but thicker; and his legs come after him as he walks, and he looks as if he never could be in a hurry."

"Thank you. I think I ought to know him now. It will be my own fault, if I don't. Not a pleasant man to look at, if you do him justice, Mrs. Wilcox. No wonder that people don't seem to like him very much."

"Ever so much worse to deal with, than he is to look at, Mr. Kit. Keep out of his way, sir, that's my advice. I believe he is at the bottom of your trouble somehow. Though what good he can get out of it surpasses me."

After begging her to keep a sharp look-out, and to send for me at once if she saw anything suspicious, I made the best of my way towards "Bulwrag Park," and was amazed at the change a few months had wrought. All the wilderness of work stood thick with houses, all the sloughs of despond were firm hard roads, young trees were in leaf where surveyor's flags had waved, and public-houses blazed with glass and gilt, where bricks had smouldered. The

Great Exhibition was in full swing, and the long streets were alive with cabs and broughams. However the old house still looked grim, and gaunt, in its dark retirement, and the Scotch firs near it were as black as ever ; and I passed with a throbbing heart the bay-tree, which had sheltered my love and myself from the snow. I ventured to gather a spray of this, and put it as a keepsake beside my Prayer-book.

After two or three rings, I was admitted, and shown into the place I knew so well, and it seemed to my fancy to be glistening still with the tearful eyes of my darling. Then Miss Geraldine, the younger and more gentle of the daughters, came and looked at me with some surprise, and said that she would show me where her mother was, and I followed her into a morning room.

The great lady looked as well as ever, and received me with a stateliness which reminded me of her sister. She was beautifully dressed, so far as I could judge, and seemed in high good humour, and inclined to patronise me.

“ Mr. Orchardson, I think you said, my dear ? Mr. Orchardson, who married our poor Kitty. Well, Mr. Orchardson, I hope that you are happy. But surely—surely she did not do

this? And if she did, you must not appeal to us. Sometimes she forgot herself—but still—and quite in the honeymoon—no, I am sure it cannot be.”

I was determined not to be provoked, although it was very hard upon me. This violent woman was pretending to believe that the scratches on my face, from last night's fall, were inflicted by my dear wife's nails. I did not condescend to answer that; and I was certain that she knew I had no Kitty now.

“I have ventured to intrude upon you,” I said, “upon a matter of important business, Madam. To ask if you will kindly tell me how I can send a letter, so as to reach Captain Fairthorn. He is at sea, I know, upon a voyage of exploration, or something like that; and it may be very difficult to communicate with him. But I have a very important message——”

“Nothing amiss with your poor wife, I hope. Oh, I should be so grieved, if there were anything of that sort. She was flighty and wild; but with all her faults, there was much that was good about her. You could never see it, Geraldine, as I did. Please don't tell me, Mr. Orchardson, that after all your goodness to her

—for few would have married her knowing what she was—she has had the heart to deceive you.”

“No, she has never deceived me, Madam ; there is no deceit in her nature. But—but for some good reason doubtless,—for the present she has left me.”

No one can tell what it cost me to drag out these words to her arch enemy, who was taking them in, like a draught of nectar, not only for the fact—which she had known when it occurred—but for the anguish they were costing me.

But she kept her countenance, like a mighty actress, that she might quaff her enjoyment at leisure to the dregs.

“I cannot understand what you say, Mr. Orchardson. It is simply impossible that poor Kitty, that your bride, that your dear wife you were so wrapped up in, should—should have run away from you.”

“I cannot say whether she ran, or walked, or how she went—but she is gone.”

“You astound me. Geraldine, you had better leave the room. Such things are not fit for good young girls to listen to. Now, Mr. Orchardson, tell me all about it. But first accept my sincere condolence. Although, as

you know, I was against the marriage, mainly for your sake, I can assure you. I knew her so well—but so soon, oh, so soon! I could not have expected it, even of her. And did she inflict these sad wounds, before she went? A tender remembrance? Oh, it is so sad! But one thing I must beg of you—do not be soured by it. Do not conclude, as most young men would—that all women are bad, because this one has proved so ungrateful to you. And after seven years of desertion, I believe, you will be at liberty to take a better wife.”

“I want no better wife. There could be no better wife. I love her with all my heart, in spite of this mistake. And I will never look at another woman, while I live.”

“What a noble husband! How could she run away? And doubtless with some ignoble wretch—no other would have taken her from your arms. But when did it happen? Do tell me all about it. And who has supplanted you, so very, very quickly? One would hardly believe it in any story-book. And you so devoted—oh, how your heart must ache! Do let me order you a glass of wine.”

“No wine, thank you. And I cannot tell the story, which would only increase your

affliction, Madam. Only one thing, in justice to my wife. No one has supplanted me in her affection. She is as true to me, as I am to her. She has been misled by some despicable trick. And, by the God in heaven, I will kill the man who did it."

"No horrible oaths before me, young man!" Her face, lips and all, turned as white as a sheet, as I spoke with the whole fury of my soul in voice and eyes,—the wrath of a quiet man wronged of his life.

Then we gazed into one another's eyes, until she was obliged to turn away.

"I could not expect you to have good manners," she said, after sitting down, and expecting me to begin; "if you behaved like this, before your wife, there might be some excuse for her running away. She has been used to the society of gentlemen."

"And that she has had in a humble way, since she became my wife. You must thank yourself for what I said; for you laboured to goad me up to it. And I mean it, Madam. I spoke with no profanity. I am not given to swearing. Whoever has done me this foul wrong has ruined my life, and shall pay for it with his own. Give him warning of this, if

you know who he is. I have nothing more to say than that."

Fear for the moment overcame her fury. And I left that house, with the firm conviction that my misery, as well as my happiness, had proceeded from it.

CHAPTER XXI.

MET AGAIN.

HOTCHPOT HALL has been a fine old place, as any one would say who looks at it; and it would have been a fine place still, if the owners had been of like quality. "It taketh its name," says an old County book, "from a very ancient rule of law, that if sisters be in coparcenary, as heiresses to landed estate, and one of them hath from the same source a several estate by frank-marriage, she shall (as is just and seemly) bring that into *hotchpot*, which signifieth a mixture for a pudding, ere ever she can enjoy rights with the rest."

Whether that be correct or otherwise, is far beyond my power to say, for I know not what "frank-marriage" is—nor for the matter of that "coparcenary"—but at any rate there stands the house, which savours in some degree of a pudding, being built of many-coloured

stones ; and the people for several generations have taken their name from this old place.

Though it stands in the midst of a flat and dreary country, with good corn-land spread among desert fens, and fewer and smaller trees than ours—for the glory of Middlesex is the noble elms—yet the house has the advantage of a fine rise towards it, and a wide and open view for many miles across the level. This gives it the air of an important mansion, and one that deserves to be kept in good repair. But for three generations now, the owners had been coming down in the world, by reason of bad times, as they themselves declared, but as anybody else would say, of their own badness. Till the last successor had scarcely the right to call himself the owner.

Sir Cumberleigh Hotchpot was of good descent, if name may stand for nature, on his mother's as well as his father's side ; for his mother had been Lady Frances Cumberleigh, the daughter of a North-country Earl. But she had brought no increase to the family estates, and had rather assisted to lessen them. And her son had pursued the same course, by gambling, and a dissipated and rambling life. It was only by sufferance now that he dwelt,

when he fled from London creditors, in one wing of the old house, till some one could be found, who would take it upon a repairing lease, for it could not be sold to advantage.

This baronet was cunning, though he was not wise; and in spite of all misfortune he relied on little tricks to keep himself going, while he still hoped to indulge in devices on a larger scale, to fetch himself round. He took good care to reap his gains with the keenest promptitude, while he left his losses to be gleaned by very tardy process. And this had tended, more than once, to impair his popularity.

Sam Henderson came and said to me, while I was thinking what next to do, after getting the better of one enemy—"Would you like to see old Crumbly Pots?" Sam had been making money lately, and scorned anybody who could not pay up—"It might do some good, and can do no harm. He is ducking his head among his moats and meres, because he was hard hit at Ascot. He owes me five ponies; he was ass enough to back that cur *Sylvester*, a nag who lays his ears back, the moment he is collared. I am pretty flush now, and I don't care to squeeze him; but I'm going to the July, for one more spree, before being tethered finally.

He won't dare to show his mug there; but you and I could toddle on to his earth, afterwards."

I told Sam plainly that I did not understand the meaning of his overture. But he only replied—"Then the more fool you. Can you understand this—I am going to the July meeting at Newmarket, where the best two-year-olds of the season come out, and you may see five or six of old Chalker's string. It would do you a deal of good to see them, and take your mind out of your own hat; though you don't know a race-horse from your old *Spanker*. If you like to come with me, I will stand Sam, according to the meaning of my name and nature. I shall make another hatful of money there, for cockering up the bridesmaids, and that sort of thing; and after that, we might rout up old Hotchpot."

I perceived that Sam's meaning was most friendly; and after consulting Uncle Corny, who thought that I sadly wanted change of scene, and a little more experience of the world, I arranged to go with Sam to Head-quarters, as he called it, and after the racing should be over, to proceed to Hotchpot Hall, in Lincolnshire. Sam could procure me admittance there; and I longed to come face to face with my old rival.

With the racing I was pleased, as any man must be at beholding noble animals, and hoping that the best of them may win. Of the thousand guiles and wiles, that defraud them of fair play, I was happy enough to know nothing, and believed that the two legs across them were as honest as their four. Yet I wondered sometimes; and it proved how little one may judge of quality by appearance, and how true the Holy Scriptures are, when the horse that seemed likely to be last came first.

Of Sam I saw little; for he was too busy, going the round both of stables and of houses, and forming opinion less by eyes than ears, and most of all by his own conscience, which told him how he would have acted in the position of the rest. Sam had a conscience not only nimble, but extremely sensitive, which enabled him to judge that of other sporting men perhaps less highly gifted. For these he charitably made allowance, forgiving their defects when he pocketed their money.

"I have not done so badly," he said on Friday night; "I made a fine hit through old Roper. That old chap is worth a mint to me, for I know every twist of his grand old mind. The Professionals were cocksure that *Columbine*

was meant, and she could not have lost, if she had been. How much have you won, Kit? I put you up neatly. You might have made a hundred, without risk of a hair."

"Well, I only bet half a crown, and that I lost. I think *Spanker* could have beaten most of them. They don't seem to me to go at any pace at all."

"That is what a greenhorn always thinks. If you were on their backs you would soon find out the difference. Well, let's have some supper, and be off by the night mail. But you look queer. Have you met any one you know, old chap?"

"Not a soul that I know, except Mr. Chalker; and I only know him by sight. But this afternoon, I saw a face that I have seen before, though I have no idea who the owner is. I looked for you to tell me, but I could not find you."

"Very likely not. I went to see the saddling. You seem in a way about it. What makes you take it up so?"

Upon this I told Henderson about the man, who had gazed at me so, through the clipped *Arbor vitæ*; and that now I had seen the same man in the throng on the Heath, and could

swear to him anywhere. At first he was inclined to laugh, and thought I must have dreamed it; but seeing how serious and positive I was, he naturally asked how it was I let him go, without at least ascertaining who he was. I told him that I had done my best; and that I believed the man knew me; for our eyes met point-blank, until he turned his away. And then I had pushed through the crowd to seize him, but a fat man on horseback came clearing the course, and a rush of some hundreds of people swept us back, and when I could get out of it, the man had disappeared. I described him and his dress, to the best of my ability; and then Sam gave a whistle, and said—"I don't think it can be. He can scarcely have been here, without my knowledge."

"You recognize him? Who is he?" I asked with some excitement. "Don't keep it back, Sam. It is most important to me."

"Well, the face, and the hat, and the green pearl in the scarf-pin remind me uncommonly of Downy Bulwrag; though I do not know him very well; and it can hardly be. He is out of England, I am told; and if he had been here, I should have met him in the ring. For he always comes to bet, and he is a very deep

file, though he knows very little of racing. He comes to invest for old Pot sometimes; and it is the only time Pot ever makes any money."

"But he may have gone off, when he saw me," I said; "he would hardly dare to run the risk of meeting me again."

"Wouldn't he? It would take ten of you to drive him. Downy Bulwrag is the coolest hand I ever came across. I give him a wide berth myself; for there is nothing but bad luck to be made out of him. He is worse than his mother, a thousand times; and everybody knows what she is. I am very glad you missed him. For he would have had the best of you."

"Would he indeed?" I exclaimed rather hotly. "I am not a milksop, Sam; and I fear no man on earth, when I have reason to believe that he has wronged me."

"You are strong enough, Kit," Sam returned, with some contempt; "we are all aware of that, my friend. You are stronger, I dare say, than Downy Bulwrag, although he is no chicken. But he is one of the first boxers in England. He has made a hobby of it. He can hold his own with the biggest prize-fighters. He could double you up, before you got near him. And it is not only that, my boy. Likely

enough, he would not have touched you; for he never loses his temper, they say. He would have had you up before the Bench to-morrow. He can always put anybody in the wrong. And then how should we have gone on to-night? No, it was a lucky thing that you got no chance to tackle him, supposing it was Downy, which I scarcely can believe. All the fellows are gone who could have told me. But I dare say I shall find out in London. Now let us have some grub, or we shall miss our train."

Sam Henderson's words set me pondering deeply. I had not intended to assault that stranger, whoever he might be, but just to bring him to a halt, and make him tell me who he was, and what he meant by coming on the sly into my Uncle's garden, and watching me in that peculiar manner. Now I felt pretty certain as to who he was, in spite of the difficulties Sam had found about it. If my description tallied so closely with that of Donovan Bulwrag, it was likely to be no one else who had come so to spy upon me. For there was the motive at once made plain. The man, who had robbed me of my wife, would naturally come to see how I bore it, to learn

perhaps what sort of adversary I was, and to gloat upon my lonely misery. I felt delighted when I called to mind that I had indulged in no sighs or soliloquy that evening, but worked away steadily and even cheerfully, whistling every now and then for company to myself. My deadly enemy could not say—"Poor devil, how miserable he looks!"

And then why should I have such a bitter enemy? I had never done harm to this Bulwrag, except by marrying a young lady upon whom he had set his wicked heart, but who never would have had him, whatever he had done. And again I had defied his mother, and thrown her into one of her furious fits; but even if he had heard of that, it could not have moved him to any great wrath. From all I had heard, he was not so very deeply attached to his mother; and he must know, as everybody else did, how little was enough to infuriate her.

As I thought of all these things in the train, with Sam Henderson snoring, or rather roaring in his sleep (like a celebrated horse who had won a race that day), the only conclusion I could come to was that my case was more mysterious than ever; that some fiendish trick had been played upon my wife and me; but

how, and why, and by whom, was more than my simple, half-educated, country wits could discover as yet, or perhaps at any future time. Nevertheless I resolved to go on, and get to the end of it, whether round or square; whether it might be another sweet circle of happiness, or a coffin. And in this state of mind, being lifted for the moment out of the body, by the hoisting of the mind, I set my hands together—for it was a first-class carriage, and there was room to do it, though it seemed to me a showy thing upon the part of Sam, when third-class tickets would have done as well—and I prayed to the Lord, which I had not done lately, having found it lead to nothing, that He would interfere, and not allow everything to be under the control of the Evil one. After that I felt better; for faith is a fruit-tree, which requires (in a common soil) the choicest cultivation.

“Here we are,” cried Sam, who could sleep by the mile, and be wide awake at the direction-post; “what a heavy-headed chap you are! Just look to our bags, while I see about a trap. We have five miles to drive, and then we put up at old Cranky’s. There we have a shake-down, and I fare to want it, as the folk in this part of the world express it. They all know

me here, and they have a black mare who can travel."

For five miles we drove through a sleepy-looking land, with scarcely anybody yet astir, but a multitude of birds quite wide awake; and then we put up at a wayside inn; where Sam seemed, as usual, to be well-known. He told me to take it easy, and he set a fine example; for he very soon peopled the house with his sleep, while I wandered about to see how the land lay.

"Pots is never up till twelve o'clock," Sam explained at breakfast-time; "so you see we may just as well keep our hay in cocks. I say, Cranky," he addressed the landlord, who was coming in and out, having no maid to attend to us, "What's-his-name been down this way lately? Fancied we saw something of him yesterday."

"No, sir, not a sign of him, since you was here last. They don't seem to hit it off together as they did. Leastways that was what my Missus heard."

"More chance of honest people coming by their due. How much does Sir Cumberleigh owe you, Cranky? Take thy bill, and write down quickly."

“Lor’, sir, it would take a week to make it out. And what good would come of it when done? Sir Cumberleigh never pay nobody. No more than his father before him.” It were vain on my part to attempt to express the long-suffering of Mr. Cranky’s drawl.

“These are wonderful fellows,” Sam declared aloud to me, while the landlord looked at him, as if to say—“And so are you,” and then turned to me to see if I were likewise; “they never seem to expect to get their money from their betters, as they call them. That cock would never fight, in our part of the world. Any lady been down at the Hall, this summer, Cranky? I mean any one, who has never been before? You need not be afraid of telling me, you know. I am an old friend of Sir Cumberleigh.”

This question was put in such a common sort of way, that I dropped my knife and fork, and looked furiously at Sam. For I knew what he meant; and it appeared to me too bad.

“No, sir,” answered Cranky, leaning over him confidentially, as if he were uncertain about speaking before me. “None but the two as come last winter; and not so very much of them. My Missus did hear as Sir Cumberleigh were going to pull up, and to enter into holy matri-

mony with a beautiful young lady from London town, as had sixty thousand pounds of her own, and then we should all be paid on the nail in full. And the Hall was to be made new, and I know not what. But I said it was too good to be true, and so it seemeth."

"Hope for ever, good Cranky. Hope can do no harm to the *Hotchpot Arms*. But how goes the time? We are going to call upon this reformed gentleman, as soon as he is up."

END OF VOL. II.

